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This is the second volume in the author's chronicle of the life and loves of Eustace Cherrington. *The Shrimp and the Anemone* left him as a boy in the sudden and bewildered possession of a small fortune. *The Sixth Heaven*, which as a story stands alone, shows how an apparently dependent nature can enter into gilded circumstances and remain essentially the same.

Up at Oxford Eustace, who always had a way with people, enjoys a select popularity, but is ever the old self-critical, diffident character, grateful to his friends, idealising his sister, always the sympathetic and endearing martyr to indecision.

When he and Hilda join the house-party at Anchorstone Hall, and the sunlight catches on the skyline of those ancient roofs, whole ranges of social sensations are captured. The unaccustomed Eustace sees it all with blissful if perceptive eyes, though pitfalls yawn and skeletons rattle. But for the reader apprehensions are aroused which even his transport to the sixth heaven fails entirely to still.

Mr. Hartley's Eustachian trilogy will be concluded in a third volume announced for the Spring of 1917.

THE SIXTH HEAVEN

By the same author

NIGHT FEARS AND OTHER STORIES

SIMONETTA PERKINS

THE KILLING BOTTLE

THE SHRIMP AND THE ANEMONE

THE SIXTH HEAVEN

By

L. P. HARTLEY

LONDON

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TO
MY FRIENDS IN ROCKBOURNE

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How beautiful the Earth is still
To thee, how full of happiness!

Emily Brontë

CHAPTER I

CONCERTO FOR TWO VIOLINS

"I DIDN'T know you had a sister, Eustace."

"Oh, didn't you? Well, as a matter of fact, I have two."

"Tell me about them."

Eustace Cherrington hesitated. Stephen Hilliard was a comparatively new friend. They had met in the Summer Term, at the end of Eustace's first year at Oxford. Eustace had been reading a paper to one of the many inter-collegiate societies for the discussion of art and letters which had sprung up with the post-war renaissance of the University; they had a Ninetyish air, unashamedly æsthetic. Mushroom growths for the most part, they had their moment of glory. Their members sported striped silk ties, impossible to mistake for an old school tie, so friendly were the colours to each other. A great deal of lobbying and intrigue went to the election, or rejection, of candidates. Feelings ran high, enmities and friendships were created. Stephen Hilliard, president of 'The Philanderers,' as the society was ambitiously and misleadingly named, had congratulated Eustace on his 'Some Nineteenth-Century Mystics,' and afterwards invited him to a stately meal; and when they met again after the Long Vacation, they found themselves, to Eustace's surprise, on terms of friendship. Eustace's friends were seldom of his own choosing, but they had one thing in common: they tended to be rather well off. To this tendency, which had grown on Eustace without his noticing it, Stephen was no exception.

Rumour said that he was rich, and his rooms in the High, where they were now sitting, gave colour—brilliant colour—to the rumour. Stephen had had them done up himself, and they had none of the

shabbiness of college rooms or of rooms let to undergraduates. The bright, rather hard colours did not aim at harmony or achieve it. The black carpet was relieved by splashes of scarlet lacquer; the cushions were of lilac or scarlet, and edged with black lace; between the two windows stood an ivory-coloured lacquer cabinet, with figures in dull gold and most elaborate brass hinges. In the centre of the chimney-piece, raised on a cube of honey-coloured marble, was a crystal object which reminded one of a skull, but looked at closer, proved not to be. On the opposite wall was a long black mirror, in the mysterious depths of which Eustace could see half of himself, and all of his host, as they sat over their port. At least, Eustace was sitting over his. Stephen did not drink port.

The mirror, which kept so much to itself, reflected the shape of his narrow, aquiline face, which a cardinal's hat might so suitably have surmounted, and the deliberate, rather conscious gestures with which he peeled his pear. By comparison, Eustace's half-face, a dusky D, looked rotund and undistinguished, and he averted his eyes from it.

"Tell me about your sisters," repeated Stephen, as Eustace did not speak.

"I'm afraid I should have to go rather a long way back."

"Never mind," said Stephen. He dipped his long fingers into a finger-bowl of blue-black Bristol glass. "Pre-natal influences are often interesting, and always important."

Eustace smiled. Stephen's critics complained that if one made him a confidence he turned it to mockery. Eustace did not mind this; indeed, he sometimes felt relieved when one of his remarks was taken more lightly than it was uttered.

"I'm afraid it will be a long story," he said, "wherever I begin. Compression isn't my strong point. I could never write a *précis*."

"Waste no time in self-depreciation, Scheherazade,

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but fill up your glass, and take up your tale. I am all ears for the recital. But first let's move to what they call more comfortable chairs."

Stephen was in the habit of putting inverted commas round a cliché; it was his way of discrediting those aspects of the commonplace, and they were many, which offended against whatever might be his pose of the moment.

Glass in hand, Eustace followed his host from the table.

"You take the sofa, and I'll take the chair," chanted Stephen, "this striped one. Don't you think the colours accuse each other rather charmingly? The other we must leave for whatever ghost your *recherche* into the past may conjure up."

Whose ghost would it be? wondered Eustace. His eyes were drawn to the shining crystal that was just not a skull, and immediately the empty chair seemed to be occupied by the outline of a figure, a dark, muddled shape to find in that precise, brightly coloured room, but one which took him straight back to his childhood.

"I suppose it all began with Miss Fothergill," he said at length.

"'It' began?" asked Stephen. "What began, my dear Eustace? You must be more definite. Am I to assume that this Miss Fothergill was a kind of Eve?"

At the touch of criticism Eustace's self-confidence crumbled, and he looked downcast and ashamed. "I can't help it," he mumbled. "It's the way I talk. You're not the first person who's complained of it. . . . No, Miss Fothergill was a cripple. She used to ride in a Bath chair on the cliffs at Anchorstone, where we lived as children. She was, well, she was deformed, and I used to be afraid of her."

"But *what* began with her?" asked Stephen. "To what, if I may put it so, did she give rise?"

"Well," said Eustace, "without her, my life would

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have been quite different. I shouldn't be here, for one thing—I mean, not here in your room."

"In that case I feel very grateful to her," said Stephen courteously. "But how did she know about me? Did she give you my address?"

Eustace smiled.

"You see, it"—Stephen frowned, but Eustace did not notice—"it was like this, and this is where my sister Hilda comes in."

"Enter Hilda," said Stephen.

"Hilda wanted me to speak to Miss Fothergill," Eustace went on, "partly because she thought it would be a kind of discipline for me, and also on general principles, because the Bible said you were to visit the sick. She's always had my moral welfare at heart. And so one morning, very much against my will, I did speak to Miss Fothergill, and pushed her Bath chair for a bit; and she was very nice about it and asked me to tea."

"Of course you jumped at that," said Stephen.

"Oh no, I was terrified. I can't tell you what agonies I went through. However, before the fatal day came I went to the local dancing-class, and there I met a girl called Nancy Steptoe, who persuaded me to go for a paper-chase with her instead of going to tea with Miss Fothergill."

"Quite right," said Stephen. "Bravo, Nancy. Of course, *I* should have chosen tea with Medusa. But then, I was never good at running—except away from the Germans, in the war."

"Nor was I," said Eustace. "That was the sad part. I got wet through and had a heart attack and was ill for weeks afterwards. They were all very angry and made me feel it was a judgment from Heaven."

"As no doubt it was," Stephen said. "But who were 'they'?"

"Well, Hilda chiefly, and my Aunt Sarah, who had been living with us since Mother died, and my father.

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It really was hard on him, having to pay for such an expensive illness. You see, we were very badly off."

"I see the beginnings of a guilt-complex," said Stephen. "Only, of course, Dr. Freud had hardly been heard of then."

"Yes, I did feel guilty. I think I still do. And I used to have the most awful fear of consequences, and could hardly cross the road without asking somebody if it would be wise. But I'm growing out of that now."

"I should hope so," said Stephen. "But I still don't understand why I owe your presence here to Miss Fothergill—praised be her name."

"After I was ill," said Eustace, "she asked me to tea again—don't laugh—and for about a year or more I used to go regularly—two or three times a week—and read to her and play piquet. And then she died and left me some money."

The lines of Stephen's elegant dinner jacket (he always liked to change for dinner, however informal the occasion, though he did not insist on this for his guests) seemed suddenly to contract and stiffen. Leaning forward, he said:

"May I know how much?"

Eustace hesitated. He thought the sum would sound small to Stephen, and moreover he had always been told not to talk about his financial affairs. They were something to be kept to oneself, like one's middle name at school. For other people to know gave them a hold over you; besides, it was bad form, and Eustace went in constant dread of being guilty of bad form. But it was against his nature to withhold anything, and there could be no harm in telling Stephen.

"It was eighteen thousand pounds."

To his surprise Stephen did not seem at all disdainful.

"Eighteen thousand pounds?" he repeated. "Quite a tidy sum, as they say."

"Well, it seemed so to us, though as a matter of fact,

when I was told about it I was bitterly disappointed. You see, I had been led to believe it was much more."

"You're getting into the 'it' country again," said Stephen. "May I say, in vulgar parlance, come off it? And may I know why you were so cruelly deceived in this very vital matter?"

Eustace flushed. "Well, my aunt was, and still is, an austere, puritanical woman; she would have refused the legacy if she could have legally, and if my father hadn't wanted me to have it. As it was, she made him promise that I shouldn't be told, and for some time—weeks, I think—I wasn't. But they had decided to send me to school, and that made them treat me differently—in small ways, I mean."

"I expect your being a capitalist influenced them too," said Stephen.

"Do you think so? That hadn't occurred to me. Anyhow, they all seemed so strange that I began to get the wind up, and thought there could only be one explanation—that I was going to die."

Stephen nodded.

"Well, one day when I was feeling particularly depressed, Hilda and I went down to play on the sands, and I told her that I was going to leave her most of my possessions, as I was expecting to die. She got upset and angry, and just at that moment some children I knew came up on horseback, and congratulated me on having inherited a fortune. One said fifty-eight thousand pounds, and another, called Dick Staveley, said sixty-eight."

"Dick Staveley?" said Stephen. "I seem to know that name."

"You might. He's a Member of Parliament now, I think, and is looked on as quite a coming man."

"I believe his family are clients of my father's firm," said Stephen, "and I seem to remember Dick in connexion with some mild scandal—a love-affair in which someone had to be bought off. How old would he be?"

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"About thirty-one, I should think."

"That's the man. But what was their reason for buoying you up, as they say, with false hopes?"

"I never knew," said Eustace. "Probably rumour exaggerated the amount: I don't think Gerald Step-toe—my first informant—was capable of inventing anything. And Dick may have said sixty-eight thousand because it sounded better—he was like that. However, after they'd gone I told Hilda I would divide the money with her."

"Why?"

"Because I thought that otherwise she would have to be a governess."

"You must have been very fond of her."

"Money doesn't mean much to children, but we've always been very fond of each other in a kind of way," said Eustace. "She was ambitious for me—she still is. I doubt if I should have got my scholarship or anything but for her prodding me on."

"Or Miss Fothergill's legacy."

"No. I owe Hilda a great deal."

"And does she owe you thirty-four thousand pounds?" asked Stephen.

"Alas, no! When we got home and everything came out—about the legacy, I mean—I was bitterly disappointed. I'm not really avaricious, but I like the idea of a large sum, and I did then. Eighteen thousand seemed next to nothing. I didn't know about interest. I thought we should just spend the capital year by year. But I felt in honour bound to give Hilda half."

"Could you, being a minor?"

"That was the trouble. But to tell you the truth, I secretly felt rather relieved, and exceedingly ashamed of myself for feeling so."

"So Hilda had to be a governess after all?"

"No, because Miss Fothergill's money provided for my education, and my father was able to send Hilda to school."

"How awful for her."

"She liked it. Then the war came, and she trained as a V.A.D., but she didn't get on very well with the other nurses, and I think she found the men a bit trying—you know what they're like in hospital, especially when they're beginning to feel better."

"You mean, she found their attentions distasteful?"

"I—I think so. But they had a high opinion of her in the hospital, and got her transferred to an executive department, and she ended by almost running it."

"How terrifyingly efficient she sounds," said Stephen. "I think I should faint in her presence."

"She isn't, really," said Eustace. "I don't suppose she's any more efficient than you are—perhaps not as much."

He glanced at Stephen and then at the room which, in spite of its exotic air, had obviously been designed for utility as well as for decoration.

Stephen smiled one of his rare smiles.

"I may be efficient," he said, "but you mustn't say so. I'm trying to get the virus out of my system. It comes from my interest in money, you know. But I'm sure Hilda would despise me utterly—for that and for many other things."

"Not if she thought you were un homme sérieux."

"Is she—as far as her sex allows?"

"Oh yes. Since the war she's been helping to run a clinic for crippled children. It's called Highcross Hill. It was quite a small affair to begin with, but she took it in hand, and built on to it, and it's going splendidly now."

"Eustace, you surpass yourself. What a spate of 'its'. But where did she get the money to do all that?"

"Well," said Eustace, "I suppose from me."

"Ah! So you did divide the legacy with her!" exclaimed Stephen.

"Yes," said Eustace, "when I came of age. I'd so often said I would—I felt I had to. Between our—"

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selves, I didn't much want to, when the time came. You see, I've always felt that I should never be able to *make* any money—I'm not built that way. People who can make money seem to me like miracle workers. Perhaps that's why I set such store by it. I'm not interested in it—as you say you are; I just want to have it."

"I suppose the money accumulated while you were at school?" said Stephen thoughtfully.

Eustace looked rather uncomfortable.

"Well, not very much; you see, my education cost a lot."

"Not more than four hundred pounds a year, I should imagine, even at Haughton," Stephen remarked. "Haughton the haughty, Haughton of the haut ton. Unless you were charmingly extravagant and plastered the walls of your room with Old Masters, there would still be over two hundred a year left over for a rainy day, as they say."

"Yes," said Eustace doubtfully. "But it didn't turn out like that. However, I'm glad to think they all lived in easier circumstances and my father was able to enjoy some luxuries before he died. He had a gay nature, and wasn't meant to be a beast of burden, harnessed to family responsibilities."

"I didn't realize you were the head of the family," said Stephen.

"My father died of Spanish influenza two days after the Armistice, and just after we had moved to Willesden, where we are now. Before that we lived in Wolverhampton. We've had several homes, but Anchorstone was much my favourite. I haven't been there since we left in nineteen hundred and seven, twelve years ago."

"How old were you then?"

"Eleven."

"That makes you twenty-three, nearly a year younger than me. How absurd that we should both be undergraduates. But I'm so glad we are—let's have a

drink to celebrate our advanced years before I continue the inquisition. But perhaps you're tired of answering questions and would rather ask me some?"

Eustace said no, he welcomed the opportunity of talking about himself. It was not often that he found such an interested listener. He began to think of more things that he might tell Stephen, things that he had told no one else. He had already told him some—the reason why Hilda had given up being a nurse, for instance, and the reason, or a hint of the reason, why his legacy was not now so considerable as it might have been. But not much about himself, and it was easy, thought Eustace uneasily, to be confidential at other people's expense. Still, Stephen never repeated anything; he might make fun of you to your face but he was absolutely discreet, a rare virtue in Oxford, where tongue sharpened tongue.

"Will you, as they say, say when?" he asked, standing at Eustace's elbow with the whisky decanter and a glass.

"Stop, stop. I've got to sit up and do some work when I get back."

"Work, work, the word is always on your lips, Eustace, but I never see you doing any, I'm glad to say."

"I put it away when you come, of course," said Eustace. "I take it out when Hilda comes."

"I think I shall send for her."

"You won't have to," said Eustace. "She's coming down next week. I shall ask you to meet her."

"Oh no, I should make a very bad impression. She would leave by the next train. You must invite some of your smart friends, Antony Lakeside and His Royal Highness."

His Royal Highness was a very minor German royalty whom Stephen had encountered in Eustace's room on the occasion of the prince's one visit. Antony Lachish, whose name Stephen chose to miscall, was a freshman of ancient family and winning manners who

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went through Oxford like a ball of quicksilver, staying with this clique or that only long enough to make his loss felt. Eustace, as Stephen knew, was already beginning to expect the slight sense of heartache which occurred when this bright apparition faded.

"Oh, they wouldn't do at all," he said. "She'd think them playboys. I should like to introduce her to some of my solidier friends."

"Thank you, Eustace."

"Hilda's not at all like me, you know, in any way," said Eustace, as though this was a supreme recommendation. "She's very beautiful, for one thing."

"Oh, that's too much," said Stephen. "All the time you were talking—forgive me, Eustace—I envisaged her as plain, a Salvation Army lassie. I could have said, when she reproved me for being worthless and idle, a drone from the capitalist hive, 'Well, Hilda, plain speaking and plain faces often go together.' Now I shall have to arrange to be called away from Oxford when she comes. I have an idea your younger sister would be more indulgent to my shortcomings. You haven't told me about her."

"Oh, Barbara," said Eustace in quite a different tone from the one he used when speaking of Hilda, "she's like an india-rubber ball. Nothing worries her and nothing depresses her. She goes her own way. The odd thing is that Aunt Sarah, who was very strict with Hilda and me, and still is in a way, doesn't seem to mind what Barbara does. I suppose she doesn't expect so much from her. She's not eighteen—she's only just left school—but she's actually persuaded my aunt to let her have a latch-key, and bring the youth of Willesden in to dance in the evenings, with the carpet turned back, you know, and a gramophone, and all the movable furniture stacked in the hall and on the stairs. She would never have allowed Hilda or me to do anything like that—not that we ever wanted to."

"I should hope not," said Stephen with a light shudder. Controlled and inscrutable as it was, some-

times almost mask-like, his face registered distaste at the idea of Barbara's pleasures.

Eustace found himself taking up the cudgels for her. "I suppose the zeitgeist runs stronger in her than in us," he said. "She enjoyed hockey and lacrosse, you know, and all those things. She's somewhere in the middle, and not at either of the ends."

"Aren't you fairly central, too? Wouldn't you call yourself W.C.?" asked Stephen, who sometimes admitted into his conversation a flourish of stately impropriety.

"Well, in a way, perhaps. But I'm like a top that always needs whipping; I'm inert, I don't go by myself. Barbara does."

"And Hilda?"

"She relies on something outside herself, but she's different again—she's like a dynamo. I don't know what would happen if the voltage, or whatever it's called, got changed, or if someone threw a spanner in the works."

"What unpleasant metaphors you use," said Stephen. "I don't think machinery's a fit subject for ordinary conversation. But if we must talk about power-houses and such-like organs of generation—aren't you really their chief source of supply?—their oil jet, their crankshaft, their coupling-rod, their carburettor, their sparking-plug, their three-speed gear, their little oil-bath, their turbine, their—what is it that poets are beginning to write about?—their pylon——"

Eustace laughed.

"Well, in a material sense I am. Of course, Barbara has what money Daddy was able to leave her, and Aunt Sarah has a little of her own, and naturally Hilda and I contribute something to the household expenses—but not much. Don't imagine I'm a sort of hero in the family; Hilda and Aunt Sarah feel in their hearts, I think, that Miss Fothergill's legacy was a divine dispensation meant to put me on my mettle,

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and take away any excuse for failure. They know I'm always looking for such excuses. My health is one. If they feel indebted to me, as they may do, they think the best way to repay me is by an extra-strong dose of moral supervision."

"What tree do they want to see you at the top of?"

"I don't think they know."

"They would get no satisfaction, for instance, in watching you scale the social ladder?"

Eustace blushed.

"I'm afraid they wouldn't see anything meritorious in that. Hilda would rather I was a steeple-jack."

"But in some way or other, it's got to be 'O altitudo'?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"'He that is down shall fear no fall'—I think I shall constitute myself an anti-Hilda agent, warning you of the perils of the heights and extolling the virtues of the lower levels—'Eustace, I charge thee, fling away ambition. By this sin fell the angels.' Hilda couldn't deny the sound Christian morality of that, could she?"

"Oh, she isn't in the least worldly. It's some kind of moral eminence that she would like to see me on."

"Even that might be a bad eminence. Think of the dangers of spiritual pride!"

"I often think of them. . . . But I wouldn't like you to go away with the idea that because Hilda sometimes pricks me, she is therefore a thorn in my side, or that she urges me to do impossibilities. When I said I owed her a great deal, it was an understatement. But for her I might be pushing up daisies in France."

"Oh, Eustace, what an expression! Never, never, use it again. But how did she do that? How did she come between you and—and the daisy-chain?"

"Well, when the war broke out, Hilda was quite carried away by it. She was living at home, wondering what she should do. She had tried her hand at several things and given them up—chiefly because she

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doesn't find it easy to work with other people. The war gave her her opportunity—she was just twenty-one when it broke out, and it was an inspiration to her. As I told you, she didn't get on very well to begin with, but they soon realized how valuable she was. Meanwhile, I lingered on at school and enjoyed, rather ingloriously and not very whole-heartedly, all the privileges one has at the top—you know what an autocrat one becomes even if one isn't good at games, which I wasn't. To my secret satisfaction I had a medical exemption from playing football, on account of my heart. Hilda wanted to see me in khaki, of course; you couldn't expect her not to. But she was always very nice about it, and said she would like me to be a hospital orderly, or a mess-waiter, or a storeman, or something of that sort. She never imagined I should be passed fit for general service; but when I did join up, in the autumn of nineteen-fifteen, I was. Hilda was disgusted, her sense of justice was outraged, and she immediately set about getting the decision altered. She had learned something of the ways of the R.A.M.C., and she took me about from one doctor to another until my medical history must have been known to half the British Army."

Stephen tilted his head back a little and turned his eyes away from Eustace. He seemed to be looking over the top of something that obscured his view—his mental view, for there was no material object in the way.

"Did you mind her doing that?" he asked.

Eustace took a moment to answer.

"Well, yes and no. Of course, it was rather undignified appearing before Medical Boards armed with a sheaf of doctors' certificates. It didn't make a very good impression. I don't think I should have gone through with it but for Hilda—I shouldn't have had the moral courage. They wouldn't have thought the better of me, though, if they had known that my sister was egging me on. Perhaps they did know, for it was she

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who set the machinery in motion. They may even have seen her walking up and down outside the camp gates, waiting to hear the result of the examination."

"Did she really do that?" Stephen's voice sounded incredulous.

"Yes, more than once. I remember coming out and she was so agitated she couldn't speak or ask me what had happened. She hated the neighbourhood of camps, too. She admired soldiers in the abstract, but she never liked them near her—it was one of her troubles when she was a V.A.D."

"I can see it would be a handicap," said Stephen. "What a curious war you must have had, tied to the chariot-strings of this beautiful Boadicea and whirled out of harm's way."

Eustace glanced uneasily at his confessor. Stephen's sympathy had its limitations. He could feel with you for a certain distance, and then his sense of the ridiculous or the unsuitable stepped in, and you realized you were not confiding in an alter ego, but in someone who was supplementing or correcting your version of events with an interpretation of his own.

"Oh, I didn't spend all the war like that," said Eustace. "I soon got settled down in the Ministry of Labour. Hilda helped to arrange that I should still wear khaki. She wasn't altogether satisfied with my progress, but I still think I was more use sitting on a stool than standing in a trench. I say I *think* that, I don't always feel it. But I hadn't many of the qualities of a soldier. And Hilda was quite right about my health. Even sitting down I got a tired heart, or something, and just before the end of the war I was given another Medical Board, which discharged me from the Army. They didn't tell me exactly what was wrong, but recommended me to rest for six months. That was why I came up here so long after everyone else. I didn't expect to be discharged, and asked if there wasn't anything else I could do; but the President of the Board

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said to me, 'My poor boy, you have done your utmost for your King and Country.' "

Eustace paused.

"Did he really say that?" asked Stephen.

Eustace was surprised, and for a brief instant wondered if Stephen disbelieved everything he had said. But he came of a legal family, and was going to be a lawyer himself; no doubt he had to practise incredulity. It was a useful accomplishment which he, Eustace, might do well to learn. He turned to Stephen with a smile.

"Yes, that's what he said."

"Well," said Stephen. "I'm sure he was right. Thank you for the recital, Eustace. You have been most patient in satisfying my—I fear—indiscreet curiosity. I shall reserve my comments for another occasion. In a minute or two I'm going to tell you the story of *my* life. I've arranged it (I think 'it' there is the mot juste) in six sections. First, birth and repressions. Second, childhood in Torquay and repressions. Third, youth in Kensington and repressions. Fourth, school and repressions. Fifth, the war and escape from repressions. Sixth, my future as a solicitor, which will be the longest and most glorious section, and will tell, among much else, how I mean to inflict repressions upon others. But before I start, I think you will need a drink and I will put a record on the gramophone, because the key of our conversation will have to change—not into a higher key, I'm afraid, but into a more commonplace one, say from C sharp minor into E flat. Now what would you like to hear?"

Hardly had Eustace said "Schubert" when he remembered a peculiarity in Stephen often commented on by his friends. He would ask them to choose a record, but he never played the one they chose. So Eustace was not surprised to hear his host say:

"If you don't mind, I don't think we'll have Schubert."

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He moved across to a cabinet made of some pale, highly polished wood, with glass knobs, and began to pull out the drawers.

"No, not Beethoven. He would suit Miss Hilda perhaps—gigantic gestures against a hostile sky—but not us. Our feelings are too complex. No, nor Brahms either—Heavens, how Miss Hilda would despise those steamy wallowings! Away with Brahms, she would say—let him stew in his own undergrowth. Boccherini? I don't know why I ever got that record, I wouldn't even bring it to your sister's notice. I can hear her say 'That sugared eighteenth-century chit-chat makes me sick. How could it help anyone to be better? What possible use is it to God or man?'"

"I don't think Hilda despises people quite as much as you imagine," Eustace put in.

"Well, she couldn't help despising *him* . . . Berlioz now, the Damnation of Faust." Stephen looked interrogatively at Eustace. "That's more the kind of thing, isn't it? But no, Miss Hilda would see through the bluster and posturing to the hollow core within. 'Full of sound and fury,' she would say—'signifying nothing. Take it away! Burn it!'"

"Oh, she's not so violent as that," protested Eustace. "At least, not often. And she wouldn't quote Shakespeare: she isn't at all literary, you know."

"She would see through Berlioz all the quicker for not being. I'm sure she detests shams. I rather like them, but I should never dare tell her so. Now what have we? Borodin. Isn't it odd how every composer's name begins with B? I think Borodin is the most unsuitable we've turned up yet. Whining, plangent, amoral if not immoral, Oriental, moody, emotionally self-indulgent; Miss Hilda has just written a memorandum to Lenin saying that on no account must Borodin be played within the borders of the Socialist Soviet Republics. 'Very well, Miss Cherrington, his memory shall be liquidated.' Perhaps we shall never

find what we're looking for—perhaps there isn't any music that expresses your relationship to Miss Hilda."

"It must bring you in too," said Eustace. "Don't forget that. It must suggest the story of your life that you're to tell me."

"Rather a difficult synthesis," Stephen said. "Much as I should like to be admitted, I think I had better be kept out. I should strike an alien note. For instance, I should want to know how Miss Fothergill's money is invested and whether Miss Hilda's clinic stands on a sound financial footing. I should have to be present as a ground bass, growling and droning away while you and Miss Hilda disport yourselves on the upper registers. I keep forgetting Miss Barbara. I don't know why—you didn't tell me much about her. Perhaps she could be introduced as a note that is always forgotten? It would be rather difficult. The music could pause—*pausa lunga, pausa grande*—to indicate that Miss Barbara has been suitably forgotten, and then start again."

"I don't really forget her," said Eustace, rather ruefully; "it simply is that I've been so much with Hilda."

"It simply is—it simply is," echoed Stephen. "What a lot of responsibility you give to that poor 'it.' We might have a trio in which one part was always silent, except for a brief passage marked *allegro giocoso*. Then the 'cello would describe the carpet being rolled up and the furniture put out to freeze in the hall, or break its legs on the staircase, followed by an outburst of jazz, with some ingenious double-stopping to give the effect of feet shuffling on the floor. During that movement the first and second violins would leave the platform in a marked manner, and only return to play their *andante con massima tenerezza* when the carpet had been relaid, and the furniture fetched out of hiding."

Eustace laughed. "I'm afraid we are a bit like that," he said.

"I knew," said Stephen. "The new movement would

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start with a lovely, slow, ascending passage to indicate that every feature of the allegro—every wrinkle in the carpet, all the scraping and scratching of the furniture, every note of jazz and all the heavy breathing of the dancers—had been put completely out of mind. There might be a bar or two of restrained welcome to your Aunt Sarah on being allowed to return to her own drawing-room."

"Oh, she generally goes to bed," Eustace said.

"Poor Aunt Sarah! How does she get there, if all the furniture's on the stairs?"

"I expect she finds a way round it," said Eustace. He was slightly nettled by this unflattering reconstruction of his home life. Stephen did not appear to notice.

"Well, I won't follow her any farther," he said. "I shall leave her frustrated by the fire-irons and ambushed by the arm-chairs. Now I must return to my task. Ah, here's something that might do. Yes, I think it will do." He took out two records. "Of course, it only gives one aspect of the case. I say 'it' deliberately, in order to arouse suspense."

"Which aspect?" asked Eustace.

"You'll hear. But perhaps you know the piece?" Stephen added. "Bach's Concerto for Two Violins."

Eustace did not know it. He had ambitions to be musical, and music-teachers had cherished ambitions on his behalf; but at a certain point he had stuck. It was a point he had reached in several of his studies, a respectable distance from the ground but out of sight of the summit. He had learned—perhaps too readily—to take these stopping-places for granted and not try to improve on them. Their presence still constituted a challenge, but then, the background of his mind was littered with challenges. How often had he begun to discuss music with a musician, only to find himself out of his depth, clutching at some straw of information that was not knowledge, though it had the air of being; while his interlocutor, not suspecting that a fraud was being practised on him, launched into deeper waters

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where Eustace dared not follow. Yet how dull it was to say, "I haven't heard that," or "I'm afraid I don't know what the Lydian Mode is." Stranded on some convenient sandbank, Eustace would try to lure the expert back to the shallows of his subject without exposing his own ignorance.

Enclosed in this mood of self-depreciation he suddenly realized that the music had been going on for some time. That was what music did for him: it made him think more intensely, but about something else. He really must pay attention. One could not always tell, at least he could not always tell, with Bach: there were signs that this concluding phrase might be the last but one. He stole a glance at the position of the gramophone needle. Yes, it would be.

"That was lovely," he said, as Stephen got up to turn over the record.

"I don't believe you heard a note," said Stephen. "But you must listen to the next movement, for this is just how I imagine you and Miss Hilda in your times of greatest spiritual" (he paused for a moment)—"interpenetration."

He gave Eustace a slight bow, which Eustace automatically returned; and the movement began.

If Eustace did not understand music, he could appreciate and enjoy it, and the first phrase of that divine melody held him spell-bound, not only to the spirit of the music, but for a time to the music itself; so that when Stephen, his impassive face transformed and softened, murmured, "You see that you begin to repeat what your sister says," he heard as well as saw what Stephen meant.

"Yes, but I answer her sometimes, too," he said. Stephen nodded. Did Hilda ever repeat what he said? he wondered. He did not say much that was worth repeating—but he sometimes quoted Hilda's remarks, the more trenchant and incisive ones, half in admiration and half in malice. But that was not the kind of repeating Stephen meant. He frowned. The music

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seemed to rebuke him with its nobility, its integrity of feeling. His thoughts travelled back. It was not in their everyday relationship, he realised, that such harmony was to be found. Then Hilda always took the lead. Stephen should have chosen an air with an accompaniment as his symbol of their relation to each other. This was all give and take.

The music went on, establishing in his mind its convention—if a mood so living could be called a convention—of flawless intellectual sympathy, of the perfected manners of the heart. The beauty was founded on the reasonableness of each utterance; it was born miraculously out of a kind of logic; the notes were not the parents of beauty, as with Schubert, but the children. This celestial conversation gave a sense of union no less compelling than the impulse to a kiss.

Eustace's mind travelled back, looking for the moments when he and Hilda had been most nearly in accord. He seemed to have to go a long way back, to the cliffs of Anchorstone, when she asked him to partner her in a pretence three-legged race; to the Downs, after another race in which they had defeated Nancy Steptoe and her brother, Hilda's traditional foes. He remembered the exquisite sense of communion he had with her then; he remembered a similar enlargement of the spirit when he had persuaded her to accept the half of Miss Fothergill's legacy. The quality of these moments could be heard, he fancied, in the serene interaction of the two violins. But they were the outcome of emotional stress, in one or two cases of differences and hard words; how could they compare with this music, which was like a reconciliation without a quarrel?

And what was there to show lately for the promise of those early days? Had he fulfilled his manifold obligations to Hilda? Had he paid her back? He had given her the money, true; he had been as good as his childhood's word, but only after a struggle with his conscience very unlike the eager giving on the beach at

Anchorstone. Since then, in moods of self-complacency, he had caught himself reasoning that he had done for Hilda all that he could be expected to do, and that his generosity entitled him to all the efforts she made for him, entitled him even to feel annoyed and irritable when those efforts required, as they often did, corresponding exertions on his part. Indeed, Hilda was always putting her oar in, constituting herself the voice of conscience; she was a task-mistress, leading the chorus, undefined, unrecognized, but clearly felt, of those who thought he ought to try more, do more, be more, than he had it in him to try, or do, or be.

A sense of unworthiness stole over Eustace and came between him and the music. The heavenly dialogue seemed now to be couched in a foreign language: though he could still follow the sense, he no longer understood the words. Why not enjoy the beauty? Why try to relate it, competitively, to something in his own life? What had made Stephen dig up the question of his relationship with Hilda? To keep its meaning at full stretch was, he sometimes felt, a burden greater than he could bear. He tried to put her out of his mind and listen unhampered by the thought of her, but it didn't do; something cold and set in his attitude resisted the music. He must humble himself and invite her back. He did so, the stiffness round his heart relaxed and melted and the music once more poured its ineffable message into his waiting ear. Only just in time; the two voices maintained their sublime colloquy for a bar or two more, and were silent.

"I could see you liked that," said Stephen, "and I think Miss Hilda would have liked it too. In the third movement, which I'm just going to put on, I'm afraid you'll have to face ordinary life again, and a moment comes, I must warn you (indeed it comes twice), when you both grow rather strident and shout defiance in unison, whether at each other, or at a third party, I leave you to decide."

The music started off at Bach's typical quick trot, a

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pace which, being uniform and neither fast nor slow, the pace of the mind rather than of the emotions, left Eustace respectful but unmoved. This was a case for understanding, not feeling, and he did not understand. But he was waiting with interest for the strident passage when the sound of shouting, that had been audible for some moments but had seemed part of the general noises of the street, suddenly localized itself under their window and seemed manifestly addressed to them.

"Hilliard!"

"Eustace!"

The names came up raggedly from below. Then someone called out, "We want Eustace." Immediately four or five voices took up the refrain, and "We want *Eustace*," chanted with a formidable and threatening accent on the last word, filled the air.

Stephen looked interrogatively at his guest.

"Shall we take no notice?"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be any good," said Eustace. "They'll have seen the lights. Ask them what they want me for, would you, Stephen?"

Stephen opened the window, letting in a rush of fresh air, and leaning out spoke in an impersonal and affronted tone, rather as one might address a gathering of footpads.

"They want you to go down to them," he said, coming back and not trying to conceal the vexation in his voice.

"Who are they?" asked Eustace.

"I don't know, but I should guess they come from Christchurch. I think it was Lakeland who spoke to me." There was rancour in Stephen's misrendering of the name.

"I thought I recognized his voice," said Eustace. "It isn't easy to mistake. Did they sound hostile?"

"No, just rather drunk."

Eustace looked about him in perplexity, avoiding Stephen's eye. It was a flattering summons, and Antony

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would be sober even if his friends were not. Suddenly the rhythmic scratching of the gramophone needle filled the room; during the interruption the Concerto had played itself out, without either of them noticing. Stephen walked across to the instrument, and with a gesture much brisker than was usual with him removed the record.

"But we heard the strident passage after all, didn't we?" said Eustace ruefully.

Stephen said nothing, but immediately, like a commentary on Eustace's words, the concerted demand "We want Eustace" again smote upon their ears.

"I think I'd better go down and placate them," said Eustace uneasily. He rose, looking guilty and worried. "It's been a lovely evening, Stephen, and I hate to break it up—but I think they would if I didn't. I know them in that mood."

Stephen didn't seem to be open to good-byes.

"What about the work you were going to do?" he said.

Eustace glanced at the skull on the chimney-piece. It gave him an old-fashioned look, but could not tell him the time, and he had to fumble in rather an exposed manner for his watch which had slipped into a corner of his pocket as if ashamed of recording misspent hours.

"It's only eleven—I shall just rush round and see them, and then dart back to Stubbs."

"Well, well," said Stephen, who seemed to have recovered his good humour, "if you must, you must, but I don't think Miss Hilda's blessing will go with you." He stooped to pick up Eustace's gown, which lay in a round heap in a corner like a black cat asleep. Relieved and grateful that his host now seemed accessible to farewell, Eustace took the garment from him.

"You will come and meet Hilda at lunch next Wednesday, won't you?" he said. "She'll be up for the day."

"I shouldn't dare," said Stephen.

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"Oh, do come. She's lovely, as I told you, almost a great beauty. Everyone says so."

Suddenly a terrific blare of "WE WANT EUSTACE" burst through the window, and even crept faintly up the stairs.

"Good-bye, Eustace," said Stephen. "I mustn't keep you from your friends."

He shut the door, turned out the light, and sitting on the window-seat looked down into the street. He saw Eustace step on to the pavement, to be at once enveloped by scurrying, eddying figures whose wild cries suggested they might be going to tear him to pieces. His long scholar's gown, among their short ones, made him look, to Stephen's disenchanted eye, like an older crow mobbed by fledglings. When the uproar died down, he heard Lachish say, "Was it very awful of us, Eustace? You see, we did want you to come down."

Stephen couldn't catch Eustace's reply, but it sounded conciliatory, even gratified. Soon the sound of voices faded away, in the direction of Carfax, except for an occasional high-pitched laugh or bass guffaw, and then the clocks of Oxford, striking eleven, drowned the last audible trace of Eustace and his rout.

Finding the air pleasant and not too cold, Stephen sat on at the window, and let the night stream over him. The High was almost empty now, and flooded with pale light against which the shadows showed dark as the black notes on a keyboard. While he watched, the moon swung clear of the crocketed spire of St. Mary's, opposite. It was nearly full, and the white disc seemed to be peering at him. Lifting his face to its scrutiny, he stared back with a look as enigmatic as its own.

CHAPTER II

SCHERZO FOR TWELVE MATCHES

It was seven o'clock, and Miss Cherrington was laying the table for their evening meal. Her hands, gracefully shaped but seamed from hard work and with the veins standing out, showed bluish against the table-cloth. Having laid two places, they paused in their to-and-fro movement and she raised her head.

An electric-light bulb hung over the table. Someone had draped the hard white shade with a petticoat of pink silk to save the eyes and spare the complexions of the diners; but Miss Cherrington, leaning forward, got the full glare on her upturned face. It revealed many things—abundant grey hair, pulled but not strained back, wrinkles on her brow and cheeks, a faded skin, tired eyes still startlingly blue, a prominent bony nose, and a mouth that self-discipline had forced into a straight line. She thought so intently that she might have been listening. Then, apparently unable to answer her own question, she opened the door and called up the staircase.

"Barbara!"

Unmistakable but not overpowering, bathroom noises, always a festive and reviving sound, trickled down into the little hall. There was no answer, and she called again.

The swishing ceased, and a voice that easily overcame the obstacles to audibility replied:

"What is it, Aunt Sarah?"

"Did Hilda tell you"—Miss Cherrington began in tones almost as loud as Barbara's, but the effort to be unladylike was too much for her and she resumed her speaking voice—"what time she would be back?"

A moment's silence was followed by a great parting of the waters and then by the opening of a door, and

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a figure, clad only in a bath-towel, appeared at the head of the staircase.

"Oh!" Miss Cherrington's exclamation conveyed a host of misgivings.

"Excuse my unconventional attire," Barbara said, "and don't be afraid, I shan't catch cold. Hilda said she might be a bit late, but we weren't to wait for her."

"I'll lay for three, then," said Miss Cherrington.

"Yes, I should. If Jimmy blows in he'll have had his supper. If not, he can go without."

"Oh, is he coming?" asked Miss Cherrington rather helplessly, but there was no answer, only a whirl of the bath-towel, a flash of pink leg and a slam of the bath-room door.

Thoughtfully Miss Cherrington returned to the dining-room, laid another place, and then, after a moment's hesitation and with the air of sacrificing her own to someone else's sense of fitness, walked across to the tantalus on the sideboard. It had been one of Eustace's presents to his father, and it always reminded her of him. She took out the square, sparkling, heavy bottle and held it to the light. Yes, there was just enough. She put it back.

Eustace had collected a number of small objects—bowls, boxes, cups, saucers, plates, glasses, vases, ladles, tea-caddies, all meant originally to hold something; empty and disused now, they still had to be cleaned and dusted. Miss Cherrington frowned. Some, like the tantalus, were presents from Eustace to his family. None of them cared much for bric-à-brac, and no one was quite sure which ornament belonged to whom; but the question of ownership arose, and was mildly discussed, when Eustace wanted to borrow a few for his room in Oxford. He said that some day they might appreciate startlingly in value; but Miss Cherrington was not convinced. Eustace had no sense of money: it had come to him too easily. There were the scholarships, of course, but then you won scholarships, you did not earn them. They were favours con-

ferred by life on its favourites, of whom Eustace seemed to be one, and hardly more creditable than a prize won in a sweepstake. They kept him from coming to grips with life. And his taste for bric-à-brac, was not that another side of the same weakness: the wish to surround himself with objects which had outlived their usefulness, which were not co-operating, which led a privileged existence away from the hurly-burly, seeming indeed to condemn it—parasites tolerated for their looks?

It was only during the war that Eustace had begun to develop this tendency. His life in London had fostered it; but Miss Cherrington knew where he got it from: he got it years ago in Anchorstone, in the drawing-room of Laburnum Lodge—where, in fact, he got everything. She had disapproved of the shillings he won from Miss Fothergill at picquet; but little did she realize that they were to be the precursors of the legacy that had changed their lives. That was a prize indeed. Alfred had laughed at her when she begged him not to accept it; he even laughed, later on, when she begged him to remember that the money was not his. She had never understood why, at the time, everyone was so pleased, in a knowing, furtive fashion, as though at the birth of a baby—everyone, that is, except Miss Fothergill's relations and her companion, whom Miss Cherrington was thankful she had never had to meet. After all, it was nothing to be proud of, this scoop from an old lady, who had had more than one stroke and perhaps hardly knew what she was doing. She had taken Eustace away from them, and put him on the wrong road, that was what she had done; she had given him ideas that would bear no fruit, Miss Cherrington was sure of it.

At this point her mind, as nearly always, refused to consider further the train of associations that the name of Eustace conjured up. She knew that they hid him from her, making her unfair to him. With an effort she turned her eyes from the little things that reminded

her of him to the more substantial pieces of furniture that were of pre-Eustacian date. The chairs and the table and the curious sideboard might not be everybody's taste, but they belonged to the period at which her own was formed, and at which her view of life took shape. There was nothing spurious in them, no suggestion of a bargain based on charm on the one side and ignorance on the other, which might turn out to be a bad one. Nor was there in Barbara, oddly as she behaved according to the standards of Miss Cherrington's generation, nor in Hilda, oddly as she behaved according to any standards.

The world was a work-place to them, not a gaming-house.

She finished the laying of the table and went out to help Annie in the kitchen.

"I enjoyed that soup," said Barbara as they were finishing the first course. "Did it come out of a tin?"

"Of course not," said Aunt Sarah, "and I wish you wouldn't talk about food. It's a bad habit, and you know how I dislike it." But there was no reproof in her voice, and the look she gave Barbara across the table was full of fondness. "Why did you put on that dress?" she continued. "Isn't it rather—rather fly-away when we're alone together?"

Barbara glanced from one plump shoulder to the other and then down to her waist-line which, following the strange fashion of that day, lay somewhere in her lap. When she looked up, her face, which had Eustace's snubness of feature but cast in a more cheerful mould, showed a deeper shade of pink under her soft brown hair.

"Well, I'd had a bath, and then, you see, we're not going to be alone. Hilda will be here any minute now, and Jimmy may be coming in after."

"I do hope nothing's happened to Hilda," said Miss Cherrington, ignoring Barbara's last remark.

"Oh no, why should it?" said Barbara. "She's old

enough to look after herself. Do you think she's likely to be abducted?"

Miss Cherrington looked a little pained, and then, when the look was fading away, repeated it with interest as though to show it had been no accident.

"Do you think it was altogether wise to invite Mr. Crankshaw to come in *just* this evening?" she asked, fixing her eye rather sternly on the chicken which Annie had placed in front of her.

"I didn't actually ask him," said Barbara. "I gave him a general invitation, and this turned out to be the night he thought he could get away. He won't mind Hilda being here, if that's what you mean, and I should like him to meet her, though I can't think what they'll find to say to each other."

Miss Cherrington, having completed her survey of the chicken, carved off a wing with professional skill and handed it to Barbara. She reserved a leg for herself.

"I didn't mean that. I meant that Hilda might prefer to be alone with us, since she comes so seldom. She's sure to have a lot to tell us about the clinic, and—and about Eustace too. It was a great thing for her to go down to Oxford to see him, busy as she is. She won't find it so easy to talk freely in front of a stranger."

Barbara took a large helping of bread sauce.

"She won't mind. Everyone likes Jimmy. She'll have plenty of time to talk before he comes, and then, if you still want to talk secrets, we can go into the drawing-room and light the gas fire. Besides, he may not come. He's working very hard just now."

"How old did you say he was?" asked Miss Cherrington.

"Just twenty-one."

"I thought you told me he was twenty-three."

"That was someone else. You're getting muddled."

"It's not to be wondered at if I am," said Miss Cherrington. "Still, as long as *you* can keep their ages apart. . . . Mr. Crankshaw is the engineer, isn't he?"

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"Yes, but don't say it as if he was an engine-driver. When he's passed this exam., he'll be able to put some letters after his name, four at least, not just B.A., like Eustace."

"I wonder how Eustace is getting on with his work," said Miss Cherrington. "He doesn't have reports any longer, which is rather a pity. I'm not sure it was a sensible idea letting him go to Oxford. They seem to spend a good deal of their time playing about."

"That's what Jimmy says," said Barbara. "Mind you, he doesn't grudge it them; but he says he's sure to get a job of some kind when he's passed this exam., even if it's only in a garage; but you can be a B.A. and nobody's going to want you—it's just an ornament."

"Yes, and of course Eustace is a good deal older than the average undergraduate," said Miss Cherrington. "He starts with a handicap. Listen! Wasn't that the front-door bell?"

They listened, and a second buzz smote the stillness, so loud they both wondered how they could have been in doubt about the first.

"You go," said Aunt Sarah. "I'll put the chicken down by the fire. I quite forgot to. Annie will be keeping the soup hot in the kitchen."

Barbara jumped up. Miss Cherrington heard the front door open, and the excited timbre of voices raised in greeting—a sound unlike any other sound. Low-pitched, warm, and resonant, Hilda's tones mingled with Barbara's insouciant chirpings like a 'cello with a flute. Miss Cherrington was glad that the sisters had plenty to say to each other, and said it with such eagerness. It was important with Hilda to be there when she arrived, and was still steaming with communicativeness. Barbara would talk at any time, but Hilda only under the stimulus of an occasion, and when she was excited. Conversation was a form of activity with her, not an automatic function.

It was past eight o'clock. Miss Cherrington earnestly hoped that Barbara's engineer would be kept away by

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his work. According to Barbara, all her young men worked very hard; yet how often they found it possible to take an evening off.

The door opened and Hilda came in. Barbara came in too, but one did not notice that. Miss Cherrington rose and embraced her elder niece.

"How are you, Hilda?" Her voice left no doubt that she really wanted to know. "Have you had a tiring journey? Let me look at you."

"I'm very well, Aunt Sarah, thank you," said Hilda. "You know I'm never tired."

For a moment she stood, almost posed, with the smile of welcome on her face, as though to satisfy her aunt's demand for scrutiny. The scent of the damp night air came with her. Little drops of moisture on her fur collar caught the light and glistened like dew. There were drops on her hair too, and her face, shadowed by the soft wings of the collar, glowed with freshness. She was like a night-blooming cactus surprised in the act of flowering. Then, as though unaware of the poetry of her appearance, she pulled off her coat with a vigorous gesture and threw it on a chair, where in a moment her hat joined it.

"I ought to have done that outside," she said, "but I couldn't wait."

Now it could be seen that the foliage of the flower was extremely severe. Starting from an almost masculine white collar and a black tie descended a coat and skirt of navy-blue serge which had the intimidating effect of a uniform without actually being one. In obedience to the uniform idea, though in defiance of fashion, the waistline of this garment was more or less in the right place; so that when Hilda put her hands up to pat her hair and again when she stretched her arm out to pull a chair from the table, the lovely lines of her figure were at once revealed; and the movements themselves were so graceful that Miss Cherrington and Barbara, who knew them by heart, watched without speaking.

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"Well," she said, sitting down, "*I have* had a busy day."

"I expect you have," said Barbara. "I expect you kept other people busy, too."

Hilda stared at her. "Other people?" she said, in a puzzled way, and as though the words meant nothing to her.

"Yes, other people," persisted Barbara. "Porters, bus-conductors, taxi-drivers, Eustace, and so on. Other people."

"Oh, I see what you mean," said Hilda, and as light dawned on her she laughed one of her rare laughs. It was quite a performance, Hilda's laugh, a small seizure, not loud or raucous, but spectacular and transforming, a visitation of the god of mirth which demanded the attention of her whole being. Recovering, she said with tears in her eyes, "Yes, I suppose I did make some of them run about a bit."

"Let's hear it all," said Barbara, and Aunt Sarah nodded.

"Oh, there's not a great deal to tell, really." As Hilda dived into her thoughts you could almost see them eluding her, hiding in the recesses of her mind and seeming far less interesting than they had a moment since. "I left Highcross about eight o'clock —"

"Did you leave it in good hands?" asked Barbara.

Hilda looked at her, but this time she did not laugh.

"The new Matron seems capable," she said. "I hope she is. We went to enough trouble choosing her. Anyhow, if anything goes wrong, they have my address. Then I did some things in London—I got some gloves——"

"What sort of gloves?" asked Barbara.

"Cotton gloves. Not for me, for the children." Without noticing Barbara's look of disappointment, Hilda went on, "And some scrubbing-brushes and a new vacuum-cleaner."

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"Can't you leave that sort of thing to the house-keeper or whoever it is?" asked Barbara.

"Barbara, dear, I wish you wouldn't always interrupt," said Aunt Sarah.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Hilda. "No, people make such a mess of the things you leave to them that in the end you save time by doing them yourself. . . . Well, I did that, and got to Oxford about half-past twelve. I was going to take a taxi, but when I asked the fare the man was so extortionate and then so surly that I decided to walk. However, it isn't far to Beaumont Street. Eustace isn't in College now, you know; they've turned him out."

"How monstrous of them!" cried Barbara. "Is it like being sent down?"

"Of course not. But with all these men coming back from the Army, and the normal quota of Freshmen up as well, they're crowded out, and naturally they prefer to send the older undergraduates into lodgings and have the younger ones in College, where they can keep an eye on them."

"I should have thought the older ones really wanted keeping an eye on more," observed Barbara.

Hilda looked surprised. "Would you? I should have thought they would need less supervision as they grow older."

"It depends on a good many things, I expect," said Miss Cherrington. "Personally, I'm rather sorry that Eustace has been left so much to his own devices, but I dare say I'm wrong."

"I'm not sure that you are," said Hilda darkly.

"What are his rooms like?" asked Barbara.

"Well, the sitting-room is airy and sunny, and larger than necessary, I thought, but his bedroom is a poky little hole, and I doubt if any sanitary inspector would pass it. I said to Eustace, 'Why didn't you find some lodgings where the bedroom and the sitting-room were the same size?' " Hilda's voice grew warm with recognition of the reasonableness of this arrangement.

"What did he say?" asked Barbara.

"That he needed a large sitting-room because friends often dropped in, and that these were the only lodgings he could find that had a large room and were at all central."

"Eustace always liked a good address," said Barbara.

"Yes, and he pays a good price—three pounds a week. I said, 'Why not go further out, where you could still have a big room and it wouldn't cost so much?' He said, 'Because then my friends wouldn't drop in.' I said, 'But do you want them to? Surely they must be a nuisance when you're working? Isn't it rather awkward having to tell them to go away?' He said, 'Oh, I never do that. They might not come again.'"

"Good old Eustace!" exclaimed Barbara. "Did anyone drop in while you were there, Hilda?"

"Nobody dropped in, but a friend of Eustace's came for lunch."

"What was he like?" asked Barbara.

In the pause that followed, a quickening of interest made itself felt in the room.

"Well," said Hilda at last, "I'm not very good at describing men."

"I dare say I do notice more about men than you do," said Barbara complacently. "Was he very posh and all that? Most of Eustace's friends are."

"It wasn't the thing I noticed about him," said Hilda. "He was very well dressed—much better than Eustace, who looked like a rag-bag (I brought back some of his clothes with me for you to mend, Barbara)—and he had rather a courtly way of talking. At first I thought him extremely affected and wondered if he wasn't making fun of me."

"Oh, surely not!" cried Barbara.

"I don't think he was. But he said he was afraid of meeting me. You know the way some of Eustace's friends talk—such torrents of nonsense you can't make out what they mean (Eustace has fallen into the way of it too, I told him about it afterwards). This man didn't

quite do that. He asked me a great many questions about the clinic—very silly, some of them were, such as whether the girls were allowed to make up, and whether they mentioned me in their prayers, but he seemed to be really interested. He told Eustace he ought to try to be more like me. He was always teasing Eustace."

"He sounds quite an interesting man," said Miss Cherrington, who had been following Hilda's narrative with close attention.

"I gather you didn't find him altogether revolting," said Barbara. "What was his name?"

"Hilliard—Stephen Hilliard. Eustace called him Stephen—apparently Christian names are the custom in their set. It seems rather childish to me. He told me he was going to be a solicitor in his father's firm, and he said, 'I hope to have the pleasure of defending you against the cripples, or else,' and he made me a bow, 'of defending the cripples against you.' Eustace looked rather nervous when he said that, but of course I didn't mind. Then Eustace made him talk a little about himself and his experiences in the war. He did very well and got the M.C. He said that civilian life was really more dangerous, and that I deserved the V.C. for what I was doing; but of course he didn't mean that."

"He may have," said Barbara; "it isn't easy to tell what men mean."

"When he was going away he said, 'Were only cripples allowed into the clinic, or might he come and see me?' and I said, 'Certainly,' and I told him not to come on Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday or Friday, because then I shouldn't be able to see him, but that any other day would do, if he let me know well in advance."

"I think you might have been more welcoming," Barbara protested.

"No, Hilda was quite right," said Miss Cherrington. "A serious-minded man, such as Mr. Hilliard seems to

be, would respect her all the more for not wanting to waste his time or hers."

At this moment the coffee appeared, and while Annie was handing it round, they were all three silent, pursuing their several speculations.

"You never told us what Eustace gave you to eat," said Barbara suddenly.

Hilda showed signs of impatience.

"You would want to know a thing like that. I can't remember—oh yes, I can, because Eustace kept apologizing and saying we should have a better lunch at Ste—Mr. Hilliard's. Dressed crab was the first course, and then meringues, and then cheese and coffee."

"How delicious," sighed Barbara defiantly.

"It sounds rather expensive and unsatisfying," said Miss Cherrington. "I should have thought a simpler meal would have been more in keeping with the occasion."

"And we had some white wine. That was quite unnecessary, because Eustace knows I don't touch it, and Mr. Hilliard only drank a glass to keep him company. And we had some sherry before lunch."

Miss Cherrington knitted her brows.

"Not a very good foundation for a hard afternoon's work," she said.

"That's what I thought," said Hilda. "Indeed, I said so, and Mr. Hilliard agreed with me. Eustace said he usually went for a walk in the afternoon, but that afternoon, by a piece of bad luck, he had to go to a lecture, or a tutorial, at three, and would I mind amusing myself for an hour. I said of course not, and then, as it was still some time before three, we had a little talk."

Hilda paused.

"I'd noticed that Eustace looked a little worried, and when I challenged him he told me why. He said the College authorities wanted him to give up his scholarship."

THE SIXTH HEAVEN

"What on earth for?" demanded Barbara, pouring herself out another cup of coffee.

"Well, they said that St. Joseph's is a poor college, and they knew that Eustace had money of his own, and that it was only fair to undergraduates who really needed help that those who could afford to should waive their scholarships."

"I never heard anything so monstrous," cried Barbara.

"No, I see their point," said Miss Cherrington. "Hard-working boys from poor homes should certainly have priority."

"That's what Eustace thought," said Hilda, "but I didn't agree with him. You know how apt he is to see things from someone else's point of view. It's partly laziness, because he doesn't like to make a fuss, and partly a morbid feeling that merely by asserting your rights you put yourself in the wrong. He doesn't really believe that justice *could* be on his side, which is as stupid as thinking you are always in the right, and much less human. I urged Eustace to stand up to them and refuse to resign the scholarship—after all, it's worth a hundred a year. But he said he couldn't do that, it would look so bad—you know how appearances weigh with him. So when he had gone, I went and called on the Master of St. Joseph's."

Barbara and her aunt exchanged horrified glances.

The Master of St. Joseph's was a well-known figure, not only in Oxford, but in the world outside; perhaps even more venerated there than in Oxford. The newspapers quoted him in their sayings of the week; his lightest word had weight. In a representative list of prominent Englishmen his name was sure of a place. To call on him without an appointment, to call on him at all, seemed to Miss Cherrington, and even to Barbara, an act of incredible audacity.

"Did you tell Eustace you were going to call on him?" asked Barbara.

Hilda looked at her in surprise.

"No, of course I didn't, because he would have tried to stop me. You know how it is with Eustace, you always have to act for him. Well, I went to the Porter's Lodge and asked where Doctor Gregory lived. The man stared at me (I wish people wouldn't) and then took me through a quadrangle and left me at the door. By a piece of luck I had a card with the address of the clinic on it; I gave that to the butler, and he came back and said the Master would be pleased to see me."

Hilda did not appreciate the dramatic effect of her pause, but both her listeners hung on her lips.

"It was lucky I had the card," Hilda went on, "because, you see, he thought I had come to see him about the clinic. 'It's the oddest thing, Miss Cherrington,' he said, 'but only five minutes before you came I was reading the article in the *Clarion*.' When I looked blank, he said, 'Haven't you seen it?' And then I remembered that last week a reporter did come to the clinic, and I showed him round and told him what we were doing. I explained that I don't get much time to read the papers, and anyhow I had started out before they came. So he showed me the article, and obligingly cut it out for me to take away. I read it in the train. Some of it is rubbish, but not all, and of course it helps."

"Can we see it?" asked Miss Cherrington.

"Of course," said Hilda. She looked in her bag and brought out a newspaper cutting about ten inches long. "But first let me tell you what happened. He was very pleasant, and said he would be only too glad to do anything he could to help such a splendid cause, and that he would certainly mention us in a speech he was going to make in London on Child Welfare. Of course, he still thought I had come to see him about the clinic. Then I explained, and it was a little bit awkward, that I had really come to speak to him about Eustace. Then his manner changed, and he got up and stood with his back to the fire. But I wasn't to be put off, and told him what Eustace's financial position really was, and how

he would have been twice as well off if he hadn't given me half the money he inherited from Miss Fothergill, and it was that money that had put the clinic on its feet. I told him I had spent two thousand pounds on building the new wing and was shortly going to spend another thousand; and I said that if they took away Eustace's scholarship, I should feel in honour bound to reimburse him out of the salary I get as Secretary."

"Would you really?" asked Barbara.

"I might."

"What did he say to that?"

"He smiled and said, 'I see you are trying to blackmail us, Miss Cherrington.' Then I got rather annoyed, and said that in any case it wasn't fair to expect Eustace to forfeit his scholarship. He had worked very hard for it; whatever people say I know he did, because he was ill afterwards, you remember—and to take it away would be a breach of contract. 'We aren't going to take it away, Miss Cherrington,' the Master said, 'we're going to invite him to waive the emoluments. He will still enjoy the distinction.'"

"I said that made no difference; everyone knew that Eustace could win a scholarship if he tried; the point is, he *did* try; for two or three years he was stuffed with facts like a prize pig on the understanding, *on the understanding*, that if he was successful he would have a hundred a year for three years. Do you imagine, I said, he would have done all that, and injured his health, if he had known that in the end he might have to hand the scholarship over to someone else?"

Hilda's voice rose, her eyes flashed, and she stared as indignantly at her sister and her aunt as if they had been taking Dr. Gregory's part.

"Don't look at us like that, it isn't our fault," exclaimed Barbara. "What did he say then?"

"He said again, they were not going to take it away, they were merely going to ask Eustace, as a favour, for the good of the College, and perhaps almost as a public

duty, to let some younger, poorer man have the benefit of a University education.

"You think he was right?" Hilda went on, for Miss Cherrington had nodded approval of the Master's argument. "Well, I don't. I said, 'If you put it like that to him, he's sure to say yes. Eustace can always be parted from anything, he hasn't the energy to defend himself, or the wish. But you talk about blackmail. *That's* blackmail, if you like, to appeal to a person's good nature to do something which is contrary both to their interests and their rights!'"

Hilda spoke with much warmth and in the ringing tones she must have used to Dr. Gregory. There was something hypnotic about her. She tilted her head back as though she was addressing someone who stood over her, and Miss Cherrington and Barbara both felt as if the room they were sitting in had changed to a much larger one in which Hilda, flushed and vehement, was haranguing a distinguished elderly gentleman. To Miss Cherrington his face was a blur, but Barbara, who read the picture papers, could see it distinctly, the strong bony features, the prominent nose, the eyes deep-set under thick black eyebrows, the rebellious grey hair which was never worn twice alike, and yet was the most characteristic thing about him.

As though aware that they were evoking the scene, Hilda went on: "Then he said 'Come here a moment,' and he took me to an oriel window raised on some steps at the end of the room, with a seat round it, looking on to the College garden. We sat down and he said, 'Isn't that a charming view? I hope you have a nice one from your room in the clinic?' And when I said I didn't get much time for looking out of the window, he smiled and said, 'Now, I'll make a bargain with you. It isn't my affair really, but I'll advise them to tell your brother we won't rob him this time, if you in your turn will do something for us.' I said the clinic was full and we had a waiting list, but he said 'Oh no, it's not that. It's just to tell your brother that we're

very pleased to have him here, but that at the same time we do expect a good deal from our scholars, both while they are at St. Joseph's and afterwards. We see in his work signs of the quality that gained him the scholarship, but he doesn't seem to be developing, if you understand me—he retains his literary graces and the decorative instinct which made his papers pleasant to read, but he hasn't improved on that. He's interested in what he can make of a subject rather than in the subject itself. I'm not simply repeating my colleagues' opinion; I know, because he comes to me for Political Science. He wants to make the hour pass agreeably for both of us—and I admit he generally succeeds. In fact, that seems to be his policy in life—to make the time pass agreeably, and not only for himself, but for a large—an increasingly large—number of people. The hour he spends with me is only an hour like the others. His work is a means to that end—he's too conscientious really to scamp it, but he never loses himself in it, he's too anxious to bring it out palatable and nicely served. Now that's not what we want here, especially from our scholars; we want good, hard, spade-work. This is a kitchen-garden, not a flower-garden.

“Of course, we have our fashionable and expensive young men, and we're quite glad to have them and give them what they can absorb of the St. Joseph's outlook; their wealth and position give them influence in the outside world, and we like to keep in touch with that. It is they, by the way, whom your brother goes about with—naturally enough, for he knew some of them at school, and that is why some of us thought that the money he spends on wine-parties (don't look shocked) might be diverted into some (from the college point of view) more useful channel. I don't think they're really the right setting for him, and what I want you to do is to try to infuse into him some of the single-mindedness that you put into your work at the clinic—make him understand that life, either at the

university or elsewhere, isn't just a matter of getting on easily with people and being called by a pet name.

"Can I rely on you to tell him something in that sense? It would come more effectively from you than from me—I should only alarm him, and he's rather easily alarmed. I may say that I shouldn't take so much trouble about him if I didn't like him."

"With that he got up and said he was afraid he must bring our interview to an end, because he had an engagement, but he was glad I'd called and would always take an interest in our progress at Highcross. He took me as far as the Porter's Lodge, and then I went on to Beaumont Street. Eustace had just got back and was boiling the kettle for tea."

"Well, you *were* in the soup!" exclaimed Barbara. "I should have died."

"In the soup?" repeated Hilda. She might have been taking the expression literally, her voice showed so much astonishment. "Why? Nothing could have been simpler. I hadn't had time to forget. I told Eustace what the Master had said, word for word, just as I told you."

"I hope you made him understand," said Miss Cherrington.

"Oh yes."

"How did he take it?" Barbara asked.

"Very well, all the part about working harder, and being less social, and not spending so much on wine. What he didn't seem to like was continuing to take the money for the scholarship after they had practically asked him to give it up. I said, Nonsense. I'd been over all that with the Master, and he was perfectly content for Eustace to keep it.

"Then Eustace was quiet for a bit, and I said, 'What's bothering you now?' and he was silent in the way he is, but at last he said—'Do you think the Master imagined that I had asked you to go and speak to him on my behalf and persuade him to let me keep the money?' And I said, 'Of course not; why on earth

should he think that?' But Eustace didn't seem quite satisfied and said, 'Did you tell him you came off your own bat, so to speak?' Then I got a little impatient, and said, 'What does it matter? Surely the main thing is that you should be allowed to keep the scholarship.' "

The front-door bell rang. Barbara jumped up. "That'll be Jimmy. I'll go and let him in."

Hilda's eyes opened in surprise.

"It's Mr. Crankshaw," said Miss Cherrington in a hurried aside. "A friend of Barbara's who—who comes sometimes."

"What a bore!" said Hilda. "Well, I've told you all I had to tell. Eustace'll be all right now—and that's what I mind about."

Jimmy Crankshaw was a tall, loosely built young man, with dark eyes, a shade too round, a wide mouth obviously intended for the pipe which he presently asked if he might smoke, and strong brown hair which had a way of gathering itself into tufts. He was wearing an old coat and flannel trousers that looked precariously clean, as if they waged a constant war against grease and this was a fleeting moment of victory.

"So glad to meet you," he said to Hilda, giving her a look of friendly appraisal. "Barbara's often told me about her beautiful sister."

Hilda resigned herself to the tribute, and, as though encounters of this kind were all in the day's work, she said:

"I expect you know more about us than we know about you, Mr. Crankshaw."

"Speak for yourself," said Barbara defiantly. "Aunt Sarah and I know a lot about him, don't we, Aunt Sarah?"

Thus appealed to, Miss Cherrington cast about in her mind for a form of reply that would reconcile truth with the civility owing to a guest.

"Only just now Barbara was telling me what a busy

man you are, Mr. Crankshaw," she said. "That's a good mark for anyone."

Barbara looked gratefully at Miss Cherrington and glanced across at Hilda to see what effect this unobjectionable testimonial would have on her.

"We're all busy nowadays," said Hilda, "and I'm glad to hear you're no exception, Mr. Crankshaw. What kind of busyness is it in your case?"

"Only just engineering, I'm afraid," said Mr. Crankshaw, though his voice, to Barbara's relief, expressed no kind of diffidence. "But I'm doing a bit of pot-hunting and have to attend classes and pow-wows in the evening, that's why I couldn't get here before."

"Don't trouble to apologize, Jimmy," said Barbara; "we were having a little family conclave about my brother Eustace. You wouldn't have been able to join in."

"How do you know?" asked Jimmy. "I might have had some very valuable advice to offer. I'm a practical man, and I gather your brother's a bit of a dreamer."

Hilda rose and began to collect the coffee cups, making a sharp clatter.

"You mustn't say that sort of thing," said Barbara. "Hilda won't let anyone criticize Eustace except herself."

"I wasn't criticizing him," said Jimmy indignantly. "It isn't criticizing to call anyone a dreamer."

"Of course not," said Miss Cherrington, taking up the cudgels for their guest. "In any case, none of us is exempt from criticism. It should not be unkind, of course. Eustace often needs direction, and we have all helped him with advice from time to time in a friendly way. I don't think he is silly enough to resent it."

Miss Cherrington's voice implied that he might be.

"Now I vote we stop talking about Eustace," said Barbara. "There ought to be a close season for discussions about him. It's a kind of game. When Jimmy knows him he'll be able to take part, and say, 'I think Eustace ought to have done *this*—when he fell out of

the punt, for instance, and couldn't decide which bank to swim for—or, 'Eustace was quite crazy to do that'—when he forgot to put on his muffler watching a Cock-house match and caught a bad cold. Let's pick on Jimmy for a change. Isn't his tie a bit startling?"

Three pairs of eyes were switched on Mr. Crankshaw, and though they were swiftly withdrawn, their scrutiny left his face even redder than the tie.

"You'd think he was a Bolshevik, wouldn't you?" Barbara went on. "And of course he is, really, though he wouldn't dare to confess it here."

Mr. Crankshaw folded his arms and scanned the faces arrayed against him—Barbara's teasing and cheeky, Miss Cherrington's fast losing all expression—a bad sign, and Hilda's, the beauty of which, he fancied, had begun to burn with a deeper glow. He decided to address himself to her.

"I'm not a Bolshevik, Miss Hilda," he protested, "and the tie doesn't mean anything—Barbara ought to know that, because she gave it to me."

"It isn't very kind to say that a tie I gave you doesn't mean anything," said Barbara, pouting. "I shall think twice before I give you another."

"They say women are never good at choosing men's ties," said Hilda, giving Jimmy's tie another searching look. "Some people might think it makes you look like a railway porter, but of the two I would rather look like a Bolshevik. They do stand for something."

"There, you see!" cried Jimmy triumphantly.

"Mind you, I don't agree with what they stand for," Hilda continued, leaning her elbow on the table and shaking her clenched hand at Jimmy, who recoiled slightly. "They think a thing becomes right if enough people can be persuaded to do it. They have no sense of personal moral responsibility. I hope you're not like that."

"Oh no," said Jimmy, recovering himself. "But I believe in sharing it. Too much moral responsibility does no one any good. Now a country, or a firm, or any

undertaking that depends on one man—what's going to happen to it if he falls ill or dies?"

"It may come to an end," said Hilda. "But you must remember that it was his creation, and without him it wouldn't have existed. It wasn't created by sharing responsibility. Now if I died, the clinic at Highcross——"

Jimmy's eyes, which had wandered during Hilda's excursus on the subject of responsibility, suddenly brightened.

"I was reading about it in the paper," he said. "And there is a picture of you, too." He brought out his notecase and, wedged between some photographs only the edges of which could be seen, he found the cutting. 'Brains, Beauty and Benevolence at Highcross,' he read.

"That's one I haven't seen," said Hilda. They all got up and stared at the face as if it were a stranger's—as indeed it might have been, for without her colouring and with her severest expression Hilda looked thirty-seven instead of twenty-seven.

"Not bad, is it?" said Jimmy. "But you certainly do seem to have the cares of the world on you. Did you start the clinic from zero, Miss Cherrington?"

"Well, I transformed it," said Hilda. "I met with a lot of opposition from the directors, but now I've got them where I want them, more or less. We're going to extend, of course."

Barbara was still studying the photograph. "Aunt Sarah and I resent your being called 'The beautiful Miss Cherrington,'" she said. "It sounds as if the other Miss Cherringtons were not. You wouldn't agree, would you, Jimmy?"

"Beauty runs in families," Jimmy said.

"Now for that he shall have a whisky and soda, shan't he, Aunt Sarah?" said Barbara, getting up and pouncing upon the decanter. "And I'll light the gas-fire in the drawing-room, because it's too dismal sitting round this empty board."

She disappeared, leaving the door open. A sharp pop was heard, and Jimmy said, "That's singed her eyebrows," but otherwise no one spoke. Barbara returned, her face a little red from the encounter with the gas-fire.

"Now you must all talk brilliantly for two minutes," she said, "while the room warms. Hilda has talked a great deal, I have filled in the awkward silences, Aunt Sarah likes to listen, so we'll call on Jimmy."

Jimmy gulped down some whisky and said, "Shall I give you a demonstration?"

"Oh yes!" cried Barbara.

"That would be most interesting," said Aunt Sarah, courteously.

"Yes, but don't blow us all up," said Hilda.

"Well, I shall need some matches."

"Oh no, not a match trick!" said Barbara. "Just because he's a budding engineer, he thinks he can treat us like children. We want something scientific, with hydrogen and nitrogen and H_2O and square-roots and logarithms and sines and co-sines."

"I'm not a chemist or a mathematician," said Jimmy, gaining confidence, "and I don't mind betting you won't be able to see how this is done until I show you. Now give me some matches, Barbara, there's a good girl."

"You a pipe-smoker, and ask for matches!" cried Barbara in pretended indignation.

"Well, I've only got five left, and this needs twelve. . . . Here, don't come so close," for Barbara, having furnished the matches, was now bending over him. "The others can't see through your thick head."

"I was only watching to make sure you didn't cheat," said Barbara.

"Now, ladies," Jimmy announced in his rather loud voice, "here is the problem—to say with twelve matches what matches are made of. Two minutes allowed."

SCHERZO FOR TWELVE MATCHES

With a professional gesture Jimmy pulled back his sleeves over clean but crumpled cuffs, and began to lay out the matches to the accompaniment of a good deal of patter, which Barbara mimicked from time to time. Keeping an eye on the changing dispositions of the matches, Miss Cherrington watched the group a little anxiously. In ordinary times she would have thought attention given to a match-trick worse than wasted. She did not think so now, but she thought that Hilda might. Hilda had moved round to Jimmy's other side, where she could see the play of the matches. Once or twice she bent forward to move a match, but most of the time she seemed to be looking down on the two heads, the fair and the dark, with an expression her aunt found difficult to decipher. It was quite unlike her to be interested in anything so frivolous as this; but once, when Barbara with an exclamation of impatience, knocked Jimmy's hand away, she thought she saw Hilda smile.

"Now the two minutes are over," said Jimmy, straightening himself. "You've all had a fair chance. Do you give it up?"

They said they did.

"Then I'll show you," said Jimmy, and letter by letter a word grew under his fingers: LOVE.

"Oh, how silly," cried Barbara, shaking her head and sighing heavily. "You haven't taken us in, you've just wasted our time, hasn't he, Hilda?"

Hilda did not answer.

"Not so silly as to think a match could be made of elm," said Jimmy. "You try lighting your gas-fire with an elmwood match, you'll be a long time at it."

"And should I succeed any better if I tried with a love-match?" demanded Barbara.

"That's not for me to say," said Jimmy with a laugh. "I don't know how inflammable your gas-fire is."

"Well, anyhow, let's go to it now—should we, Aunt Sarah?" said Barbara. "But first give me back those matches. I don't like your thieving ways."

THE SIXTH HEAVEN

"May I have them for a keepsake, if I promise not to strike them?" said Jimmy.

"May he, Aunt Sarah?" said Barbara.

"Of course. But they're safety matches, and won't strike without the box," said Miss Cherrington seriously.

"Preserve me from safety matches, they always let one down," said Barbara. "There you are, Jimmy," she added, handing him the miniature stack. "Aren't you glad that you can't set yourself on fire?"

"Don't be too sure," he said, pocketing the matches.

In the silence that followed this interchange, Miss Cherrington rose to her feet. "It's past ten o'clock," she said, "and I think I shall leave you young people together. I'll just give Annic a hand with the washing-up, and then go on to bed. Good-night, Mr. Crankshaw, good-night Barbara, good-night Hilda dear, you're looking a little tired. Don't stay up too late," she said as she was going through the door.

The remark seemed to be addressed to all three of them.

Hilda looked at her watch. "I have got a bit of a headache," she said, "I don't know why—I never have one, but I suppose it's the long day."

They had moved into the passage. The door at the end stood open, and the unseen gas-fire shed a subdued but cheerful glow on the furniture of the room beyond.

"Oh, don't go yet," said Barbara. "We can't spare you—can we, Jimmy?"

Jimmy said they could not.

"It's very kind of you," said Hilda; "but I've got one or two letters I must write."

"Oh, please stay up a little," pleaded Barbara. "Aunt Sarah would think it was most incorrect to leave Jimmy and me alone together—she'd have a fit."

"Then I'll tell her I'm going," said Hilda, "and she can act accordingly. Good-night, Barbara. Good-night, Mr. Crankshaw."

SCHERZO FOR TWELVE MATCHES

Barbara and Jimmy shut the drawing-room door and stood a little uncertainly in the glow of the gas-fire.

"What's to happen now?" asked Jimmy.

"Oh, I expect Aunt Sarah will come in," said Barbara. "But it won't be for a little while yet. I can hear the plates rattling."

She had regained her composure.

"You don't think she'll send your sister instead?"

"Oh no, Hilda's got a will of iron."

"Perhaps neither of them will come."

"They will if I scream."

He saw her fingers with the red light showing through them. "Darling," he said, and took them in his own.

CHAPTER III

A WEDDING

EUSTACE climbed up the steep concrete staircase that led rather unceremoniously from the busy pavement of Cornmarket Street into the premises of the Flat-iron Club.

He would have liked to go quicker, for he was anxious to see about the arrangements for the dinner, but he had been told he must not hurry upstairs. He was conscientiously law-abiding, and for him doctor's orders had the force of law.

There was no reason why he should not get completely better, they said, if he took things quietly. A muted, slow-motion existence had become habitual to Eustace; it was like living in a slight fog. But one day the fog would lift. Taking things quietly would have come easily to him if it had not been for the accompanying obligation to work hard. Neither the College nor his family nor his conscience seemed to think the two were incompatible.

For five months now, since Hilda's interview with the Master, from which his memory shied away, he had been trying to combine them, and not without success, his tutor said.

They could promise nothing, of course, but a first was not out of the question, if he went on as he was doing now. Well, not perhaps exactly as he was doing now, for now he was performing his function as secretary of the Lauderdale, a society recruited from among the members of St. Joseph's, but one of which the Fellows of the College did not whole-heartedly approve.

Eustace had been secretary to several societies, more than one of which had died of inanition under his somewhat languid administration; but the Lauderdale,

an old-established body with a long pre-war tradition, was too tough to succumb to his euthanasiac methods.

In front of the green-baize notice-board in the vestibule he paused. As usual he found nothing but announcements about the activities of the Flat-iron, and of other clubs, mostly athletic; but Eustace was haunted by the idea that one day a notice would be put up declaring him expelled for the infringement of some rule of which he had never heard. This notice he would fail to see, and continue to frequent the club until at last one member, deputed by the others, would lead him to the board and silently point out the fatal sentence. Nervously he scanned the rules, of which every member possessed a copy, but his attention generally gave out before he reached the end, and he was never sure if he was not violating numbers XIX, XX or XXI.

Expulsion from the Flat (as it was affectionately called) did sometimes befall members who failed to pay their bills, but never for more recondite offences. Eustace would be the first to be turned out for having used its premises for the purpose, say, of some unlawful trade. It would be a terrible disgrace, second only to being sent down, and socially more damaging even than that.

Why, he wondered, turning into the club's familiar smoking-room, did human beings, the moment they banded together, have to invent all kinds of sanctions and taboos, designed to trip up the unwary? The room was empty; it was a little past six, the slack time between tea and dinner. He crossed over to a window-seat and watched the corners of Carfax, black with people. None of them looked up; none of them appeared to realize that here, only a few feet above them in mere physical altitude, was a summit of social eminence to which they could never attain. A feeling of warmth invaded Eustace's breast; he tried to banish it, but without success. The Flat-iron Club was often

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ridiculed by those who did not belong to it, and sometimes by those who did. A wag had said:

The Flat-iron Club
Is well worth the sub.
It's full of oddities
My God it is.

But all the same, membership of 'the Flat' conferred distinction—a distinction that appeared to be as eagerly sought by the veterans of the war, still plentiful at the University, as by unsledged freshmen. The desire for it was evidently something one did not grow out of. Over on the table lay the Candidates' Book. Eustace took it up, to see if there were any new names that might benefit by his support. He turned the pages. For those who knew how to read it, the book was something more than a social guide. By the number of signatures under a man's name you could tell just how popular he was; you could tell, too, who were his friends and, in some cases, who were his enemies. Here and there was a page defaced by the names, heavily and ostentatiously scratched out, but still legible, of those who had publicly and significantly changed their minds about their former protégés. How many stories had collected round their mutilated signatures, how many friendships had been broken by them! Only Proust, an author Eustace was beginning to feel he had read, could have done justice to the saga of slights, cuts, insults and vendettas that was apt to follow an unsuccessful flirtation with the Flat. But when Eustace tried to describe these dramas to Hilda, she proved a disappointing audience.

"Surely you don't go to Oxford to waste your time over that sort of thing?" she said, and then rather inconsequently asked if Stephen Hilliard was a member. When Eustace told her he hadn't wanted to be, she remarked with considerable satisfaction, "I knew

he had some sense." Barbara, on the other hand, was much more sympathetic; Barbara enjoyed talking about people and the way they behaved. But it was just after she had got engaged to Jimmy Crankshaw; and at the back of her mind, Eustace could tell, was the feeling that Jimmy had no part in anything that the Flat-iron Club stood for, and because of her loyalty to him she slightly resented its importance in Eustace's eyes. Of course, it's only important to me, thought Eustace uneasily, as a subject of conversation.

It was sad how the fact of not being able to share a joke separated one from people. Separated, of course, was too strong a word, but it created a frontier, a water-shed for experience, instead of a valley. Failure to see the same things as funny often meant a general failure to see eye to eye, because humour was common ground where the high-brow and the low-brow, the rich and the poor, could meet without self-consciousness.

Life at Oxford made one lazy about adjusting oneself, Eustace decided. The people who thought and felt alike drew together; and after that, within the circle, everyone was encouraged to be himself to the top of his bent. Eustace tried to cultivate the kind of remark his friends expected of him, and win the commendation "That's a typical Eustace"; but not always with success, for what they liked was something he was surprised into saying—it consisted in a kind of discrepancy between his view of a thing and the accepted view—and by no amount of trying could he surprise himself. The sally must be unself-conscious, and it was esoteric, it needed a trained audience.

Eustace the ingénu, the un-terrible enfant terrible, wouldn't go down well with the outside world, hadn't gone down well, he suspected, in spite of Barbara's protestations to the contrary, at her wedding. That had been on her eighteenth birthday, just before Christmas.

Jimmy had passed his examination, a job was in

sight or just round the corner, and she would not wait. Aunt Sarah had counselled delay, she had even called upon Eustace, rather with the air of one invoking the support of a broken reed, to withhold his consent, or at any rate to speak to Barbara with the authority of an elder brother.

Full of distaste for his mission Eustace approached Barbara, to be greeted by a volley of the little screams with which she had been accustomed, from a baby, to receive any attempt to turn her from her purpose; so after some half-hearted efforts to put the practical objections to the marriage before her, he gladly subsided into the more grateful rôle of saying how heartily he approved, how glad he was for Barbara's sake, and how much he liked Jimmy. In this he was not insincere, for the sight of Barbara's happiness would have melted a harder heart than Eustace's, although she expressed it in trills and snatches of song, sudden gestures, agonized starts as if joy had run a pin into her, that were slightly shocking to his sense of fitness.

As for Jimmy, he was not at all like a character in Henry James, definitely a representative of the Better Sort rather than of the Finer Grain, but Eustace could not help warming to his friendliness and directness of approach. The possibilities of understanding and misunderstanding, of fire and misfire, that made social intercourse fascinating to Eustace did not exist for Jimmy, who brushed them aside much in the same way as his invariable tweed coat knocked over the little objects with which Eustace had too freely sprinkled the Willesden tables. He treated life like a machine that would go if set up properly and given plenty of oil and power. These both existed in his own nature; the power was steam rather than electricity, the oil was crude, but not sticky or glutinous. Messy Jimmy might be, but it was the messiness of the engine-room or the garage, a creative messiness inseparable from energy and movement, in the busy stir of which Eustace sometimes felt static and functionless and outmoded,

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but he did not mind that. Though he preferred the society of sympathetic people, he enjoyed the sense of the complementary, when the complementary was softened by goodwill, as it was in Jimmy's case. But it made him feel nervous and inadequate, like an accompanist who knows that more is expected of him than mere dovetailing, however adroit.

On the day of the wedding the sense of the complementary had been almost overpowering, principally perhaps because the Crankshaws, a vigorous and flourishing tribe, a symbol of increase and multiplication, so greatly outnumbered the Cherringtons, who had put out few branches, and not all of those could be mustered for the ceremony. Eustace had never had a diadem of aunts and uncles. His mother had been an only child; his father's eldest sister, Lucy, who had lived for many years in Germany as a kind of companion in the family to whom she had once been governess, returned to England before the war, and now lived in a boarding-house in Bournemouth. Eustace liked the idea of her: she had travelled, and used to send him picture postcards of the places she visited, but she had never got on with Aunt Sarah, who felt her to be half a foreigner, with alien ways of thinking. There were some distant cousins with whom they still exchanged Christmas cards, and whom they referred to by their Christian names, but the names had no personalities attached to them, and when their owners appeared at the wedding, as a few of them did, they had to introduce themselves. The circle of critics who continually asked each other, 'What is Eustace doing?' without ever obtaining a satisfactory reply, existed chiefly in his imagination. Miss Cherrington had never been one to cultivate friends. She regarded them as something that no properly appointed household should be without, they had a place in the good housekeeping of life, but, like the best linen, they were not for everyday use.

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Hilda's friends were fellow-workers in whatever field of endeavour she was engaged, and were united to her by nothing more personal than a common aim. Eustace brought to the wedding one or two friends of old standing, but much the largest contribution to the bride's party came from the bride herself—school friends whom the warmth of her nature kept within screaming-distance, and several young men, carefully chosen, to whom the inevitable disappointment of being present at Barbara's wedding to someone else would be less grievous than the disappointment of not being asked.

But, all told, the bride's contingent mustered hardly a score, several of whom were unknown to each other, whereas the bridegroom's following amounted to double that number, and gave the impression of being treble, so enormously did the exuberance of their personalities multiply the impact of their presence. Even in church, walking up the aisle with Barbara, buxom and blossomy, clinging to his arm, Eustace was aware of a blast of insurgent vitality, like an incitement to procreation, from the pews on his right, a shuffling, a rustling, a turning and nodding of expectant faces; whereas from the thin ranks on the left there was no such demonstration, only a discreet slewing of the eyes and then the attitude proper to church. Responsive to atmospheres, Eustace felt relaxed on one side and rigid on the other. He wondered how Barbara felt—Barbara so like him to look at, so unlike him in temperament.

Six years younger than he when they entered the church, he felt she was now as old as he was, and would be older by the time they reached the altar steps. This advance in experience seemed a reproach to him; yet paradoxically, as they stood together on the left of the lectern, he had the fancy that the bridegroom's friends must see him as a bent, hoary bachelor, whom the sweets of marriage had passed by. But that was nonsense; even if four years had slipped out of his life,

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he was only twenty-four, and his coat was cut by one of the best tailors in Oxford. On Jimmy's coat, he could see, the braid was much too wide, while the best man was wearing a lounge suit. Jimmy looked pale and ill-at-ease, and at the sight Eustace's confidence began to mount. If his appearance was not out of tune with the proceedings, neither perhaps was he. He began to feel an aptitude for weddings descend on him, strengthening him. He even looked back to where Jimmy's adherents, though more stationary now, were still giving off their pre-matrimonial fume. As it billowed towards him, his glance caught a bright eye under a bold hat. "It's your turn next," the eye seemed to say, and for a moment he believed it.

But afterwards, in the Tivoli Café, at the wedding breakfast, the necessity for adjustment became more pressing and precise than anything implied by a distant interchange of glances with a sparkling eye. For there were so many sparkling eyes, such areas of black satin, bulging unfashionably, and of gayer colours, on figures tubular or flat; such an agitation of arms, plump or slender, such a harvest of cheeks, pink and red under the electric light, such a confusion of loud, confident voices, which were not easily stilled when Eustace rose to propose the health of the bride and bridegroom.

"I should stand on a chair, if I were you," said a stout, glossy, highly coloured lady who had noticed his ineffectual efforts to make himself the centre of attention. "They'll all see you then."

Eustace longed to be unseen and even more to be unheard, but in the latter design he was foiled, for someone on the edge of the throng, with a glass of champagne ready in his hand, called out good-naturedly, "Speak up, we can't hear you."

"It's the Oxford accent," a voice nearer to Eustace muttered, and there was a smothered laugh. But when he got under way they gave him a good hearing, and took his one joke very well. Indeed, he was quite

sorry to leave his perch and return to the arena, where the stout lady like a lioness roared her congratulations.

"You did that very well," she said. "You ought to be President of the Union."

Eustace got her another glass of champagne, and was surprised to find himself lingering not unwillingly in her padded conversational embrace, instead of moving on to his own party, who were standing about in ones and twos, without seeming to make much fun for themselves or mixing with the others.

"And who pays for all this?" she said. "I suppose you do. A bit stiff, isn't it?"

Eustace said it would be if it became a habit; but after all, one's sister only got married once, at least he hoped so.

"But you have another," the strange lady exclaimed. "Such a beautiful girl. Barbara's nice-looking, of course; but the other's a real beauty. Hasn't anyone wanted to marry her?"

Eustace felt he ought to resent this question on Hilda's behalf, but it surprised him; somehow he had never thought seriously of Hilda in connexion with marriage.

"Oh, Hilda," he said vaguely. "I don't know what her plans are."

"Well, I know what some men's plans will be," retorted the lady, "unless she lives in a convent."

"In a way she does," said Eustace; "in a clinic for crippled children, a place called Highcross Hill."

"Of course, I've read about it," said the lady, "and what a wonderful work she's doing there. But, you know, Cupid will creep in anywhere. If she's fond of children she'll be wanting one for herself."

Eustace would have liked to explain that Hilda wasn't exactly fond of children, in that way; she was sorry for them, and wanted to help them. But he didn't feel he could analyse her character to this stranger, whose mind was fluttering to the beat of Cupid's

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wings. So making the excuse that he must speak to the bridegroom's mother, he drifted away.

The elder Mrs. Crankshaw was tall and dark, and had something of Jimmy's gauntness of feature; she was vaguely Spanish-looking, which pleased Eustace, who liked foreigners.

"How kind you have been," she said. "Jimmy's dressing-case, Barbara's bracelet, and that marvellous cheque! Really you shouldn't have done it. Unless you are made of money," she added, narrowing her eyes as if to see him better.

Eustace blushed as though he had been caught boasting of his riches. Stephen Hilliard, whom he had consulted, had been dismayed at the sum he proposed to give Barbara, and advised him to cut it down by half.

"If you give so much you'll create a false impression," he said.

"But who should I create a false impression on?" Eustace had demanded. "Only Barbara and Jimmy need know, and the people immediately concerned."

"On yourself chiefly," Stephen had answered. "Five hundred pounds would be out of proportion to—well, I mean it would be out of proportion. It wouldn't correspond. It would mean something different from what you mean."

"What do I mean?" Eustace had asked uncomfortably.

"You mean to be generous," said Stephen; "but generosity isn't measured that way. People are only capable of assimilating a certain amount of generosity—the rest is wasted, worse than wasted; it will make them think you live in a fool's paradise."

"But that won't matter, if I don't," said Eustace, hurt.

"There are several kinds of paradise," said Stephen, oracularly, "none of them suitable to earth-dwellers. Do be advised, Eustace. If you don't think I'm right, ask Miss Hilda. She would say at once, 'Two hun-

dred and fifty is quite enough for Barbara. You mustn't make the Crankshafts think you're a millionaire, and you mustn't think so yourself.' I should never dare to say that to you, but she would, unhesitatingly."

"I don't think I agree with you," said Eustace. "I think I have quite as much sense of money as she has."

"How can you say that," asked Stephen, "after she rescued for you the hundred a year the College was trying to filch from you? In matters of finance, as in all matters, her opinion is absolutely sound."

Fragments of this conversation flashed through Eustace's mind as he confronted Mrs. Crankshaw's inquiring eye, and he wondered what she would have thought had the cheque been as large as he originally intended. He felt embarrassed, and wondered if it was something in him that made people talk to him so openly about subjects which were usually treated with reserve, or whether it was a convention among the Crankshaws and their circle.

"Oh, I'm not at all rich," he said; "don't imagine that. But we all want to make the wedding a success, don't we? I think it is a success, don't you?"

"A great success," said Mrs. Crankshaw decidedly. "I've always said, there's nothing like marrying while you're young. Now you must look round and see if there's anyone you fancy."

Involuntarily Eustace gazed about him at the munching, swilling throng. Barbara and Jimmy were the centre of an ever-changing but never depleted nucleus; he could see the smiles and brightened eyes and heightened manner of those who came to offer congratulations, and the delighted responsiveness, somewhat sheepish on his part, altogether radiant on hers, of the bride and bridegroom.

Eustace's heart went out to them all: this was what life should be, a symposium of well-wishers, positively, consciously, contagiously happy.

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"I see too many," he said, answering Mrs. Crankshaw's implied question. "You would have to pick one out for me."

"Nothing easier," said Mrs. Crankshaw, with a promptness that took Eustace aback. "Here's my niece, Mabel Cardew, a charming girl, I don't think you've met her."

Eustace didn't take to Miss Cardew, who was inclined to wince and wriggle, but they exchanged almost passionate civilities.

"You see how easy it is," said Mrs. Crankshaw, when her niece had sidled and chasséd away. "Now you must pick someone for Hilda, but I don't believe there's anyone good-looking enough for her. Ah, there she is."

Following Mrs. Crankshaw's quicker eye, Eustace espied Hilda. She was standing apart, talking to a rather dumpy, round-about lady with a square, strong face, whom Eustace presently recognised as Barbara's late headmistress. The pair seemed to be outside the circle of enchantment, and to judge from their faces, to be discussing something alien to the spirit of a wedding feast.

"Men might be a little afraid of her," said Mrs. Crankshaw; "she makes these boys look like babies. Not that she's old."

Eustace had a sudden vision of the sleek brown heads around him toddling on childish bodies and being lifted into prams.

"This marriage business is full of silliness and nonsense, isn't it?" Mrs. Crankshaw went on, irrelevantly. "But it gets somewhere, and there is no other way of getting there."

Once again Eustace was aware of the press of wine-warmed bodies round him, seductive, comfortable, if only kill-joy censors were silenced. Outside on the periphery, the mind and the will preserved their powers intact, and beauty shone like a vase of alabaster, untouched, not needing for its perfection any intoxication in the beholder's eye or mind.

"What do you think?" said Mrs. Crankshaw. "Could we rope her in?"

Eustace held his lasso poised; the great noose slid through the air; in a moment his sister and the headmistress, clutching at each other, were dragged across the wooden floor into the heart of the rodeo.

"Shall I go across and try?" he said, and Mrs. Crankshaw smiled assent.

They each refused a glass of champagne.

"We were saying," said Hilda, "how mistaken the Government's education policy is. It ought to spend more on providing university scholarships for promising girls. I don't mean girls like Barbara, of course, whose one idea, the moment they leave school, is to get married." She looked round. "Where is she, by the way?"

Eustace could not see her either.

"I think they must have gone to change," he said.

"To change?" echoed Hilda; "why should they do that?"

"Well, they can't travel in those clothes," said Eustace, smiling at the headmistress, whose clothes were quite suitable for travelling in. "You couldn't even in yours, could you, Hilda?"

"You're right," said Hilda; "these bridesmaid's dresses are most unserviceable. You won't catch me wearing one again in a hurry. I like the violets, though."

She bent down and raised the big dewy bunch to her face, and they seemed to become part of it.

"Don't you like weddings?" said the headmistress.

"I loathe them," said Hilda. "I don't see the necessity for them—for all the fuss, I mean."

"Perhaps you'll feel differently about your own," said the headmistress; "don't you think she may, Mr. Cherrington?"

Eustace couldn't think of a reply. Addressing the headmistress rather than Hilda, he said: "Won't you come across and help me with the Crankshavians?"

They're really very nice, but I feel shy of tackling them without support."

"Nonsense," said Hilda; "we saw him chattering away like anything, didn't we, Miss Farrell? He loves the social round."

"I think it would be an excellent idea," replied the headmistress, giving a pat to her dress and a wrench to her hat. "Otherwise they'll think us unsociable, standing here enjoying each other's society like Beauty and the Beast." She smiled up at Hilda as she spoke.

With no very clear idea of what would happen, Eustace convoyed them into the thickest of the press. To his embarrassment the crowd fell apart before them as though he was in charge of two dangerous wild animals; awe and admiration were registered, but no obvious wish to make contact with the newcomers.

Eustace had the feeling that they were making a cavalry charge, and would come out the other side victorious, unchallenged and untouched, the last thing he wanted. But a tall blond youth with a self-confident expression seemed inclined to stand his ground. Luckily Eustace remembered his name; introductions were effected; and the young man, to Eustace's great surprise, seemed well supplied with information both as to Miss Farrell's school and Hilda's clinic. He was a little patronising and facetious about those institutions, and once or twice joined issue with the ladies on points which they could not help knowing more about than he, but he held his own, that was the main thing, and the encounter was by no means a failure. Having staged it, and trusting to Miss Farrell's tact and experience to carry it through, Eustace, like Julius Cæsar, withdrew to another part of the field.

Here, flanked by the sandwiches and the pastry and the three hired waiters deftly pouring out of jugs and bottles and teapots, he was engaged by a dark, round-faced girl who questioned him vivaciously about his life in Oxford. Her interest was flattering, the questions were easy to answer. With the disengaged half of

his attention, Eustace watched how Hilda was faring. Another man had joined the group round her; they were all talking with animation, no one seemed to be left out. He noticed how one or two more stragglers paused as though wondering whether to risk it, and gravitated towards her. The sight gave him a sense of inner harmony and self-congratulation; he felt he had helped to complete something. But before he had time to analyse his feelings further, a rush of cold air caught his back and he turned to see Barbara and Jimmy coming through the door. They looked different people in their going-away clothes, and their changed appearance changed the atmosphere of the gathering. The initiation over, they were no longer glorified by the nimbus of the wedding spirit, they were ordinary human beings with a train to catch. Less than ordinary, indeed, for with their glory they had shed their dignity; and hardly had they made their farewells when the wedding guests, who till lately had been gaping at them with real or pretended admiration, suddenly rounded on them with shrieks of tribal laughter, and set about making their exit as summary and ignominious as possible.

All the wedding party were outside the café now, swarming on the steps under the Elizabethan woodwork. Only a few yards away a sleek black Daimler hung with white ribbons waited at the kerb. Eustace found himself next to Aunt Sarah; almost involuntarily he took in his her passive, well-gloved hand. The *mêlée* surged in front of them. Fists raised in menace hurled handfuls of confetti as if they had been bombs. Barbara and Jimmy came stumbling and ducking down the steps towards the sanctuary of the car, whose door the chauffeur was holding open. They had outdistanced their tormentors and were well inside, when a figure ran forward, wild as a Bacchante, and launched a new attack through the window. Nor did the bombardment cease until, their fingers fluttering farewells in the coloured shower, husband and wife drove off.

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With a gesture of exhaustion and appeasement the figure lurched into the dull yellowish light of the December afternoon. Tears of laughter were running down her cheeks.

It was Hilda.

The episode was three months old, but in recollection it still gave Eustace a shock. He still could hardly believe that that wild-eyed, tear-stained, dishevelled woman was his sister Hilda.

Startled out of his reverie, he glanced at the clock. Past seven and he had done nothing about inspecting the arrangements for the dinner. Supervision was not Eustace's strong point. Conscientiously carried out, it meant criticism, and criticism practised by someone of a normally easy-going nature often unfairly gave the impression of fault-finding. Still, he must put in an appearance.

The steward, a wispy, sallow man with a wary eye, took him into a small room, leading off the dining-room and reserved for private dinner parties. The table laid for twenty almost filled it. What a noise there would be later on, Eustace thought; the regular diners would probably send in protests. The table was decorated with freesias and jonquils; they had been arranged symmetrically rather than with inspiration—still, they had a festive air. Soon they would be stuffed in silken button-holes, and by the morning they would be withered; but they would not be alone in being the worse for wear.

Eustace sighed and took out of his pocket a plan of where the diners were to sit. Who should be neighbours was a problem, for not all the members of the Lauderdale were on good terms with each other. At the head of the table sat the President, with the distinguished visitor on his right. Next, as Secretary, came Eustace. Passing down the table, he slowly dealt out the name cards, wondering anew if *B*'s proximity to *A* would be held to atone for his proximity to *C*.

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Any disappointment on this score would be blamed on Eustace, but he thought he knew the internal politics of the society by this time; and if some blamed him, others would applaud his ingenious malice.

At last it was done. The steward reported everything in order; a dozen bottles of champagne were on ice, and more could be had. As Eustace listened to the man's recital, he quickly became infected by its reassuring tone; nothing could possibly go wrong.

He returned to the smoking-room in a sanguine frame of mind and with a sense of duty done.

He had hardly got inside the door when he heard his name called. The inflexion was unmistakable: it could only belong to Antony Lachish. He was sitting hunched up in a leather chair, his long, thin legs dangling over its arm.

"Eustace!" said Antony again, in a way that made more than one member give him an indignant, repressive look which, however, he did not notice. "Come and sit down. Where have you been? We all thought you were dead."

He smiled suddenly with extraordinary sweetness, and Eustace pulled up a chair and set it at right angles to his. But this tactical manoeuvre did not succeed, for the next moment Antony had whisked his legs over the other arm, and was looking at him across his shoulder.

"You never stay still a moment," said Eustace.

Antony's face took on an expression of such tortured self-criticism that Eustace could not help laughing.

"Do you think I'm frightfully restless?" Antony asked. "People say I am." He still looked miserably worried.

"Of course not," said Eustace soothingly. "Just mercurial."

Antony's face cleared instantly, and began to shine with self-satisfaction.

"That's a much nicer word," he said. "How kind and clever of you to think of it. I suppose my face does show my feelings too much?"

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"I don't think even you could feel as much as your face shows," said Eustace.

"You don't think me insincere?" The agonized look returned, then relaxed into the bewitching smile, as Antony said, "You couldn't expect me to practise facial control when I see you after such a long separation. What *have* you been doing?"

"Well, working a little," said Eustace.

"I knew it, I told them so. I was sure you weren't angry with us. 'He's really working for us,' I said. 'As long as we can point to Eustace, we shan't be sent down. On the contrary, we shall shine with reflected glory.'"

"You're much more likely to get a First than I am," said Eustace, who knew how little Antony's airy manner corresponded either to his ambitions or his powers.

"Nonsense, I've no mental stamina, I'm quite hopeless. Gamma minus is my mark. Only yesterday my tutor said, 'Lachish, your work is like summer lightning—an occasional flash, but miles away from the subject.'"

"Mine complained that I was always peering through the undergrowth," said Eustace despondently.

"My spies report quite differently," said Antony. "They speak of a certain First. They are beginning to take bets on it. When are you doing Schools?"

"A year next June."

"Then you've no excuse for living like a hermit. We shall come and serenade you every night. Let's begin your emancipation now. Let's dine together."

Eustace explained why he could not.

"But what is this Lauderdale Society?" asked Antony. "Describe it to me."

"Well," said Eustace, "it began long ago as a semi-political club with a Conservative background. Then the background faded away and the Lauder became a kind of dining club, a sort of protest against the plain living and high thinking of St. Joseph's. The members

threw their weight about and weren't very popular with the College or with the Dons. In fact, there was talk of suppressing it. After the war the Lauder was revived, and somehow I became the Secretary; but it didn't change its spots, the members still felt in honour bound to let the College know they felt superior to it, socially, intellectually, and in every way, and again, quite lately, there was a rumour that it was to be painlessly disbanded. That's why we're dining here; they won't let us dine in College.

"Then I had the idea of asking someone down to address us on a serious subject, like the Future of the World—someone with a name, you know, so that we might look a little less irresponsible——"

Eustace paused. He felt his effort to justify the Lauderdale to Antony had sounded lame; how much better to have said boldly, "It exists to glorify the gilded youth of St. Joseph's," but he lacked the aplomb. It was in his nature to anticipate criticism, and in the moral sphere, the sphere where Eustace was most at home though least at ease, the Lauderdale was not easy to defend.

"I see," said Antony. "I can't picture you among these hawbucks, but I suppose it's all right. Who are you getting down to improve your standing in the eyes of the Dons?"

"A rising young Conservative," said Eustace. "Staveley, his name is, Richard Staveley. I trust you've heard of him?"

Antony's mobile face ran through a number of expressions, of which surprise was the first and the last.

"Dick Staveley?" he said. "Indeed I have; he's a sort of cousin of mine, for one thing."

"I met him once or twice," said Eustace, "long, long ago when we lived at a little place called Anchorstone. I was nine then, and I suppose he was about sixteen. He rescued me once when I got lost in a wood playing Hare and Hounds."

"He would," said Antony. "He was always either

rescuing or giving cause for rescue. But to think of your having known him! I can't get over it."

"I thought him fascinating," said Eustace.

"Many people have. I didn't know him then. I was only five, but I used to hear a lot about my extraordinary cousin who was always up to something."

"What sort of things?" asked Eustace.

Antony thought a moment.

"Well, in those days it was schoolboys' pranks—you know, going up to London, putting eggs in the masters' hats, taking away something important just when it was most wanted—practical jokes with a sting in the tail."

"I can see that he might have been like that," said Eustace. "He played a practical joke on me once."

"What kind?"

Eustace told Antony about the legacy.

"You got off lightly, I think. He never played one on me, because Mama never much liked going to Anchorstone. She went from a sense of duty, because of Cousin Edie. It was apt to be frightfully dull, you know, except for Dick's booby-traps. Papa went because of the shooting. That was always good."

"But isn't the house lovely?" asked Eustace. "It seemed the most marvellous place to me. In those days my day-dreams were full of it."

"Were they?" said Antony, with the rush of sympathetic interest in his voice from which some of his popularity sprang. "Well, I don't wonder. It is a lovely house; at least, part of it is—the Jacobean part with the moat in front. Romantic, enchanted. Do you remember the helmets on the window-ledges? You could see them from outside. They weren't arranged or grouped, they looked as if the Knights had thrown them down, still warm from their hot heads, while they went to change into something more comfortable."

"I never got near enough for that," said Eustace. "I only went into the house once, in the dark."

"You would go into the new part, I expect, where

they mostly live—that's nothing much, Victorian Gothic of the later Staveley epoch—quite hideous, really, but I doubt if they know it."

"Don't they care about the house, then?" asked Eustace. He couldn't bear to think they didn't.

"Oh yes, they're devoted to it and intensely proud of it. Only they don't discriminate very much; they wouldn't think it was quite nice to."

"Wasn't there a sister called Anne?" Eustace asked.

"Yes, indeed. Poor Anne, a dear girl but dull. She never had a chance, you know. They dressed her in the most extraordinary way. At balls she could hardly bend for whalebone, she creaked all over. And her stiffness was infectious; even the most dashing young men turned into ramrods and icicles at the sight of her. It was terrible for her, terrible for everyone. She created a desert all round her. Cousin Edie was to blame in a way—but she got it from the Staveleys. They were proud of living in the last century—indeed, they were proud of everything, just of being themselves. One doesn't quite know why."

"Aren't they a very old family?" asked Eustace, to whom the ancient lineage of the Staveleys had meant a great deal, though he was shy of admitting it.

Antony seemed surprised and slightly puzzled by this inquiry.

"Well, no older than many others. Everyone's family's old if you begin to look into it. I suppose you mean all that business about prancing on the foreshore and shooting an arrow into the sea? It does sound rather romantic, but I think it was all they were good for. They never did anything else very much. They were wonderfully undistinguished."

"But surely Sir John Staveley was Lord-Lieutenant?" said Eustace, unwilling to relinquish his dream of the splendour of the Staveleys.

Antony answered with a touch of impatience. "Oh, everyone one knows is that. You only have to be long

enough in the same place. The Staveleys are my relations and I don't want to run them down, but believe me, they wouldn't have been heard of since Domesday Book or whenever it was, if Lady Nelly hadn't married into them. It was she who put them on the map."

"I don't think I know about her," said Eustace.

"Oh, *don't* you?" Antony's voice betrayed surprise; his face, even more expressive than his voice, announced consternation. But there was nothing patronizing or pitying in his bewilderment, and Eustace could not have taken offence, even if he had wanted to.

"She's the most divine, adorable woman," said Antony, his face lighting up with rapture as if she had actually been present in the room. "In Edwardian days she reigned, she was a queen. Everyone was at her feet, every heart melted at the sight of her."

"Did her heart melt too?" asked Eustace.

"Yes, alas, only too readily," Antony said. "And sometimes over objects that were not worthy of her. She had too much pity in her nature. No one could understand what she saw in Freddie Staveley, except his looks. But she had a passion for lame dogs, and always wanted to help them."

"Is he a lame dog?" Eustace asked.

"Well, not any longer. He drank himself to death, you see. She was an angel to him and did all she could to help him, took him from one place to another and surrounded him with amusing people and didn't mind what he did if she thought it would take his mind off the old failing. The Staveleys weren't grateful to her; they pretended it was partly her fault, and said she should have been stricter with him, and shut him up in a home, or something like that. Really they were jealous of her, as crows might be of a nightingale, or a bird of paradise. Even Cousin Edie used to say, 'Poor Freddie, Nelly makes him lead such a tiring, unstable life.' It made Mama furious—when everyone could see that she was wearing herself out for him. She couldn't help it if people fell in love with her. They

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still do, though she must be nearly fifty. You must meet her. I'll bring you together."

The room was filling up now with members ordering their pre-prandial sherry. They stared at Antony, but he went on as though unconscious of them.

"But we were talking about Dick. Well, he had rather a chequered career. I think he was always slightly in revolt against the stiffness and stuffiness of Anchorstone—hence the practical jokes, which were more startling than funny. He wanted life to be dangerous. That was quite in the Staveley tradition, in a way; they were always a menace to any bird or beast that crossed their path. But he used to say he thought the animals ought to be armed too, and once he dressed up as a pheasant and peppered one of the shooters. Of course there was a frightful row and he was made to apologize, but a good many people thought it rather funny. And at Oxford he was the same—he was at your college, you know, and he once said what a good thing it would be if the Garden Quad could be turned into a zoo, with lions and tigers frisking about in it, livening up the Dons and the more sedentary undergraduates. He organized one or two rags too, of the more painful kind, which ended in broken bones and the Acland Nursing Home. He used to walk about, so I've been told, with a secret smile, as though he had put a time-bomb under the University and was waiting for it to go off."

"That was before the war, I suppose," said Eustace. "I'm glad he's not here now. Shall I be held responsible if he tries to blow up the Flat?"

"Oh, now he's more rangé. At least I should think so. But he used to be rather a heart-breaker too. Before the war he had an affair with a village maiden, which nearly ended in the law courts; and during the war he got involved with a young unmarried girl of good family, which was much more serious."

"Why was it more serious?" Eustace asked.

"Well, socially, I mean. What made it more unfor-

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tunate was that she was engaged to be married, and because she had been talked about, the young man broke it off. In old days that would have counted against Dick, he would have been cold-shouldered, you know, and not asked about. But he had done so well in the war that it was forgiven and almost forgotten. He would have done even better, I believe, if he hadn't preferred danger to discipline and been plus guerrier que la guerre, so to speak."

Eustace laughed.

"I am glad you told me all this. Now I shall be on my guard."

"But that's ancient history," said Antony. "After the war he stayed on in the Middle East, among the Arabs, and made quite a name for himself as a mystery man, a sort of small-scale Colonel Lawrence. There were a great many rumours—that he was never coming back, that he had become a Mohammedan and kept a seraglio, that he was fighting against us, that he was dead and being impersonated by an Arab (he looks rather like one), and so on. He was as legendary and elusive as Waring or the Scarlet Pimpernel. Now, it appears, he has given all that up, and come back to be a politician—a rising hope of the stern, unbending Tories. Though from what I hear of his speeches he sounds more like a Socialist or a revolutionary or what is this new-fangled thing?—a Fascist."

"Do you think he's a man to beware of?" asked Eustace.

"Oh *no*," said Antony, pouncing on the negative like a cat on a mouse. "He's rather a picturesque figure in our drab age. Glamorous, you know, without the Hollywood association of the word. At least, that's how he would like to appear. I'm not sure myself that it will come to anything." He looked up and saw the clock. "Oh, Eustace, it's a quarter to eight. I must fly. And we haven't talked about you at all. Just wasted time on those dreary Staveleys. It's all my fault. When can we meet?"

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"Well, I'm free almost any time," said Eustace.

"You're not, you're not," wailed Antony, and an expression of the deepest woe took possession of his features. "You have a permanent engagement with Stubbs's Charters, an everlasting alibi."

"No, no," protested Eustace. "I've finished with him. I'm a chartered libertine now."

"Oh, how witty you are," Antony exclaimed. "But if it isn't Stubbs, it'll be something else; I know you delight in bondage. You're like Andromeda, rejoicing in her rock."

"Indeed not," said Eustace. "I pray for an appointment with Perseus."

"Well, then," said Antony, "let me find my little book." He began to dive into his pockets; his hands came out full of letters and envelopes. "Isn't it awful?" he said. "I haven't answered any of them." He threw them into the chair and rose to his feet, to have greater freedom of movement for the search.

All round them conversations ceased, and the members began to eye Antony, some with raised eyebrows, others with scarcely concealed smiles—for his inability to find his engagement book had become a legend with his friends. Some maintained that it didn't exist; others, who had seen it, as Eustace had, declared that it was just a means of gaining time, of lulling the inviter, or invitee, into a false security. As to whether it was a good sign, for the fulfilment of the engagement, that the diary should be found, opinion was sharply divided, one section affirming that Antony never broke, another that he never kept, an engagement that was written down in his book.

"Here it is, here it is," he cried. "Strange, I never knew I had this pocket. It must have been put in by the tailor to confuse me."

He retreated towards the fireplace like a dog with a bone, and began to ruffle the leaves. "Wednesday seems to be full up, and there's a blot all over Thurs-

day. What can that mean? Friday sounds such an inauspicious day. Would you be free on Friday?"

"I'm sure I could be," said Eustace; "but don't bother, Antony."

Antony groaned, and frowned portentously at the little book.

"Somehow I don't *like* the idea of Friday. It's so near the week-end, for one thing, and one never knows what will happen then. And next week seems so far away, and yet so near the end of Term. Perhaps it *is* the end of Term?" He fixed on Eustace a look of anguished interrogation. "You can't tell me? Of course not. Look, look, I'll write to you. No, I'll telephone, that would be better, so much quicker and more satisfactory. We know where we are, then. But I remember you haven't got a telephone. I haven't either. No one has. Such a stupid arrangement. Do they expect us to communicate like birds of the air? Oh, dear, what shall we do? Perhaps if I sent a messenger from the lodge, and asked him to wait——"

Eustace was too intent on observing the criss-cross flight of Antony's mind, tortured by the intolerable necessity of pinning itself down, to hear the door open; but he became aware of a stir behind him, and looked up to see five or six members of the Lauderdale Society standing round. They were in evening dress and a little self-conscious, and with them was an older man, not at all self-conscious, despite the carnation in his buttonhole.

'What is he doing here?' thought Eustace, his mind, as often, halting between the rival reality of two situations. 'He doesn't belong to our party. He must be looking for someone. He'll go away if I stop thinking about him. He *must* go away, he doesn't fit in.' Warm and relaxed by friendship, his being shrank from the effort of encountering a stranger. But the stranger did not move away, and studying his face, the features of which were so much more declared and positive than those of the faces round him, Eustace

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began to remember it, and as he remembered the stranger began to smile.

"You must be Eustace Cherrington," he said. "The last time I saw you I gave you three cheers. But I expect you've forgotten?"

Eustace was tongue-tied; for a moment he was back on the sands at Anchorstone, with Hilda beside him and the wind blowing against their tear-stained faces, while Dick, at the head of his troupe, broke the news of Miss Fothergill's legacy.

"That was a long time ago," he began, but Dick had turned away and Eustace heard him say, "Good Heavens, there's Antony!"

Antony, clasping his recovered correspondence, gave Dick a glance like the flight of a crooked arrow. "You must look me up," he said. "Eustace'll tell you where."

With his conjurer's flair for disappearance he melted from them: the air, with which he had so much in common, seemed to receive him into its transparency. Dick turned to Eustace.

"You must tell me all about yourself," he said, "and about your sister. Wasn't her name Hilda?"

"It still is," said Eustace, "but think of you remembering."

CHAPTER IV

EUSTACE AT HOME

RETURNING to Willesden for the vacation, Eustace found that he missed Barbara much more than he had expected to. Admittedly she had been a noisy and disturbing element. At ordinary times she tripped, whisked and scurried; if she was in a hurry or put out, she rattled and banged; her progress—and she was never long in the same place—was marked by the slamming of doors or by doors left open; she laughed and giggled and let fly volleys of little screams, like parakeets escaping from a cage; the moment she came in the telephone began to ring, and her voice, which for telephone purposes was high-pitched and self-conscious, could be heard all over the house; she was never more in his way than when she was telling him, with quick rushes of explanation and apology, that she must get out of it; she made the house feel much smaller and more cramped than it need have. And then there were the evenings which he had described to Stephen, when the gramophone droned to the strains of jazz, or revolved unheeded, with an insistent, sibilant, breathy whisper, while voices, unwillingly subdued, discussed which record to put on next, and Eustace waited for the tune to start and the rhythmic shuffle to begin.

It had been trying; it was the kind of thing that anyone who wanted to work had a right, perhaps even a duty, to complain about, and Eustace, who had a strong sense of what other people would think tiresome, and was more influenced by that than by his own grievances, did complain, to outsiders, if he thought he could make his sufferings sound funny. But he had been obscurely aware that all these manifestations of unreason had a purpose and were a

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prelude to something. They were the noises of the orchestra tuning up, getting itself ready to play its piece.

The wedding was the first chord: in it the meaning of these seemingly aimless dissonances suddenly appeared. But the piece was being played elsewhere, at Barbara's little house in Hitchin, and the sounds that reached Willesden were only echoes from a distant concert room.

He ought to have been relieved, but he was not, for with the confusion a kind of virtue had gone out of the place. Silence reigned and Eustace had become aware of his own footsteps and the ticking of the clock. The routine which Barbara had so often interrupted became a kind of tyrant demanding excesses of regularity.

Long ago Aunt Sarah had canalized her life; it never overflowed or enriched the land round it with the untidy detritus of living. Eustace felt that he was to blame; he had grown up too much in awe of her to try to get into touch with her. He had too easily taken it for granted that she disapproved of him. Hilda and Barbara had grown up under the same shadow, but they hadn't been chilled by it. They were at their ease with Aunt Sarah—why wasn't he? Of course Hilda, though so different, and planned on a so much larger scale, had been Aunt Sarah's spiritual child: they took the same things seriously. Barbara was irrepressible—a hundred Aunt Sarahs could not have daunted her; she wanted life, not an attitude to life, and Miss Cherrington seemed able to understand this, better in a way than he did, and not to resent it.

Eustace looked back and could see in his past life few signs of the adolescent fevers and eruptions, the sudden heats and flushes, the ungainliness, the awkwardness, the untidiness, the indiscriminating enthusiasms, the instinct to snatch and spoil and waste, to discover fresh personalities, to experiment with friends, and clothes, and catchwords, to quarrel and make it up, to follow

the fashion, to be silly and frivolous and unashamedly selfish—which were the signs of Barbara's spring-time.

For him those days had been swallowed up by the war—the war that had added four years to his life, but given nothing to its content, which had put him back with men, except for Stephen, much younger than himself, whose point of development, suitable to them but not perhaps to him, he had adopted. His emotional life was not stationary, it was actually retrogressive. How much farther back shall I go? he wondered. For the slowing-up process had not begun with the war.

True, Army life, and the routine of a Government Department had gone against his nature, they gave him nothing to reach out to, and it was then that he first consciously cultivated the stoicism of outlook, the mental habit of enduring rather than experiencing, of standing outside what was happening, which had seemed at the time not only helpful but noble. But he could find traces of it, unconsciously practised, long before that: even at school, where he had been a personage and appreciated and lived in the heart of things. His memory sped back to the sands of Anchorstone, to the period of Hilda's supreme domination, to Miss Fothergill's drawing-room where he had temporarily exchanged that domination for another less obvious but more intimate, more—more weakening. What had taken him to Laburnum Lodge? On flew his thoughts. Why, the backwash of the paper-chase—the paper-chase, his one gesture of rebellion and defiance, his one great bid for freedom.

If only that gesture had succeeded! But everything had conspired to make it a fiasco: the fainting in the woods, the torturing anxiety of everyone who loved him, the long, expensive illness from which his health, he fancied, had never fully recovered—all brought on by self-will, by disobedience, by not doing what he was told, by thinking he knew better. It was then that

he had subconsciously decided that what he wanted was automatically wrong, and that to strike out for himself was to infringe the Moral Law. If I'd had more vitality, thought Eustace, perhaps I shouldn't have been so logical. And I might have been more enterprising if I'd been kicked out into the world, to sink or swim. But Miss Fothergill's legacy took away the risk of that. I had her eighteen thousand pounds to fall back on. For a moment he tried to wish he hadn't had it; but as the mental effort failed, and reality asserted itself, he felt a warm rush of relief. He could see her hand in its black mitten, the hand like the hand of a lion which he had once dreaded so much, stretched out under its loose lace sleeve to give him the shilling he had won from her at piquet. The hand, the mortmain, was still extended, still doling out shillings.

She had not wanted him to lose his initiative: she had said so the last time they were together; she had fought with her approaching death, perhaps hastened it, in order to tell him. She was a wise as well as a kind woman; and if only he could have profited by her counsel as he had by her money!

Had it been for Hilda's good that he had always (except in the disastrous matter of the paper-chase) given way to her? In his mood of melancholy and self-reproach, Eustace didn't think it had. Centred in him, she had neglected other human beings. She had exercised her will, she had over-exercised it, and in doing so had impoverished herself. She had renounced, almost without knowing she had renounced them, all the prerogatives, the master-keys to the treasuries of life, which her beauty had put into her hand. Her beauty bloomed, not like a flower on a dunghill, but more sadly, it seemed to Eustace, like a tulip in a hospital ward, seen only by the tired indifferent eyes of the sick and the dying, which the night-nurse takes out in the evening, and which, after a little service, the day-nurse throws on the ashpan.

Still, she had found compensation in the clinic; she had made a place and a name for herself in the world. Her energies were unbounded, she could not slake them merely by acting as Eustace's director, she had to go farther afield. The clinic was an extension of Eustace. Owing to his long absences from home she had perforce relaxed her hold on him; she had not lost it, or he would not still be enjoying the income from his scholarship. His improved position with the College authorities, his new-found interest in his work, the prospect he was said to enjoy of doing well in schools—he owed them all to her. How potent she was, both in the practical and the moral sphere. But to Eustace in his present mood these signs of progress were like advances in mechanical inventions: they only affected the machinery of life, they did not go to the heart of the matter. They ministered to the emotions of pride and self-esteem and self-respect. They won the approval of conscience, which was so liable to be pleased if one achieved something, and not always particular what it was. Self-satisfaction kept one going, and could keep one going even when the springs of life were drying up. How cocky most men were after they had mended a motor-car. But it was, thought Eustace, a sterile, self-regarding happiness, demanding admiration, incapable of being shared. Whereas in Barbara's noisy frolicsome approach to the married state were discernible, not perhaps in their most elegant form, some of the impulses, transcending self, and uncontaminated by the conscious will, which together moved the earth and the other stars.

At her wedding how the dusty human scene had freshened up and blossomed, like a suburban garden after rain! Even Hilda had felt the genial excitement; perhaps she had felt it more than anyone. When she was bombarding the happy pair with confetti, did she remember the clinic and its cares? Did she even remember Eustace and his career?

With his hand on the dining-room door, he paused to compose his features for the rebuke, explicit or implied, with which Aunt Sarah would receive his unpunctuality at the breakfast-table.

It was after nine, and breakfast was supposed to be at half-past eight. Resolutely smiling, he entered, but there was no one there; a few crumbs testified to the fact that Aunt Sarah had come and gone. The rebuke was postponed. How absurd that he should mind it just as if he were a little boy! He must adopt a more adult attitude towards Aunt Sarah; it wasn't really fair to her that he should continue to be frightened of her. He must be more forthcoming, take her into his confidence, draw her out. He had got it into his head that she was not really interested in his doings, and for that reason he seldom spoke of them; but how could she be, if he always kept them to himself?

Meanwhile there were two letters by his plate, one from Stephen, one in a handwriting he did not know. He scrutinized them. Of late, with time hanging heavy on his hands, he had resorted to various devices to make the day pass more quickly. One was to put off reading his letters as long as he could. Dangled carrot-wise before him they filled the future with promise. Every hour that passed without reading them gave him a sense of virtue and increasing will-power. Sometimes he managed to go through the morning without indulging his curiosity. Usually he kept till last the letters he most looked forward to; bills he opened at once.

This other letter was not a bill, though the envelope was addressed in a handwriting so lacking in reserve or affectations of prettiness that it might almost be called commercial. Hilda's handwriting was a little like that, straightforward and unself-conscious, but this letter was certainly not from her. He slipped it into his pocket, and after a momentary struggle with his daemon, opened Stephen's.

MY DEAR EUSTACE, (he read)

I tried to get in touch with you before you went down, but failed, so abrupt, so almost incontinent, was your departure.

I wanted to see you for many reasons. You have been in hiding this term. I suppose I could have got news of you by applying to Lakelike or His Royal Highness, but pride would have forbidden such a course, even if I knew them, which (owing to my restricted social orbit) I do not.

I should like to think of you living in solitary confinement, preparing for the ordeals before us, though how much nearer mine is than yours; but I happen to know that that was far from being the case, and that you were closely involved in the latest outbreak of hooliganism at St. Joseph's (the Lauderdale Larks, I think they were called). I forbear to ask it that was why you went down so suddenly . . .

Eustace smiled. The outbreak had really been a very small one. Nothing in the J.C.R.—time-honoured victim of the Lauderdale's after-dinner frenzy—had been seriously damaged: even the umbrella stand, against which their rage was traditionally severe, suffered no worse affront than that of being carried into the lavatory. Eustace had acquired merit, as well as demonstrated his sobriety, by helping the Junior Dean to put it back in its proper place.

He read on:

. . . or if your conscience approved of smashing crockery, breaking windows, nailing the Bursar into his room, and tarring and feathering several of the harder-working undergraduates. I think you must have come to terms with your conscience, at any rate you have kept its problems hidden from me. How many of your visits, I begin to ask myself, do I owe to the activity of your guilt-complex? I feel like St. George, who was always cold-shouldered

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when there was no dragon about. But what would Miss Hilda say? Have you confessed to her?

Apropos, perhaps she has told you that she has appointed me, or rather my father's firm, solicitors to the clinic. I had a type-written letter, but signed with her own hand, asking whether we would act for her in the purchase of a small plot of land that, like King David, she coveted for her vineyard. The Naboths were unwilling to sell because they need it for a chicken-run, but I am glad to report that we are breaking down their resistance. Also, Miss Hilda has entrusted her investments to our supervision, and I think we shall dispose of her shares in the Chimborazo Development Trust, which does not (to our attentive ears) have the ring of a gilt-edged security. (Gilt-edged, it would be, in your case.)

You can imagine the commendation I have earned from Hilliard, Lampeter and Hilliard, for making this important capture. I shall expect to be created a partner *at once*.

There is no need for me to paint a rosy picture of the Highcross Hill Clinic—for the Press has already done so—or the unending possibilities of litigation it presents. Of course we never canvass for clients, but I feel that your financial affairs should not be kept separate from Miss Hilda's, and that where your heart is, there should your share certificates be also.

Yours ever,

STEPHEN.

P.S.—Miss Hilda has suggested that I might perhaps like to see the chicken-run for myself, which I shall be honoured to do. Of course, I shall have to warn her, as I warn you, against ill-considered outlays.

Eustace let his tea grow cold while he pondered over this letter. Hilda's overture to Stephen was news to him. That she had not told him of it was nothing to

wonder at. Hilda rarely wrote letters, she was too busy. But the fact of her having removed her business affairs from the nerveless hands of Ruston and Liebig, their joint solicitors, was rather curious. Now he would have to follow suit and it would involve some unpleasantness. Miss Cherrington's entrance cut short his meditation.

"Good morning, Aunt Sarah," he said brightly.

A very slight modification in Miss Cherrington's expression acknowledged his greeting.

"Oh, you are here," she said. "It was a better morning an hour ago." She bent over the table to pick up the plate on which Eustace had had his eggs and bacon, and looked round for something else to clear away. Flustered by her waiting eye, Eustace began to bolt his toast and marmalade.

"I've just had a letter from Stephen," he announced, as chattily as hurried mastication would allow.

"I don't think I quite remember who Stephen is," said Miss Cherrington, pouncing on the toast-rack. "Ought I to know?"

"Stephen Hilliard, I mean. He lunched with us the day Hilda came up to Oxford."

"I can't keep pace with all the meals you have, you seem to have so many," said Miss Cherrington. She opened a drawer in the sideboard and took out a crumb-brush and a tray. "And you have a good many friends too. But I think I do remember his name. Didn't Hilda say he was well dressed and a little affected?"

Eustace could not help flinching at this unflattering description of his friend, but he kept to his resolution to be more communicative with his aunt.

"Well, you could describe him like that. But there's more in him really. He's—he's going to be a solicitor quite soon." Hoping Miss Cherrington would be impressed, he paused.

"Doesn't that take rather a long time?" asked Miss Cherrington, her eye wandering from the clock to the calendar.

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"Oh, not in his case," said Eustace eagerly. "You see, special arrangements are being made for ex-servicemen, and men with university degrees. Besides," Eustace added vaguely, "he's going into his father's firm."

"He's very fortunate, then," said Miss Cherrington, "in having a position ready for him. Have you finished with your teaspoon, Eustace?"

Eustace gave his cup a hasty stir and handed the teaspoon to her. "Here it is, Aunt Sarah," he said, trying to sound as though he was giving her a present. "Yes, he is lucky. But what I was going to tell you was, Hilda has taken her business affairs away from Ruston and Liebig, and given them to Stephen—or rather to his firm."

"Really," said Miss Cherrington. "Thank you, Eustace, I'll take the tea-cosy. That is very unexpected. I wonder if it's wise?"

"Oh, I think it must be," cried Eustace enthusiastically. "Ruston and Liebig are such stick-in-the-muds. I'm not sure if they even exist. Besides, he's a German."

"They must exist, Eustace," said Miss Cherrington, reasonably. "What makes you think they don't? Your father always found them quite satisfactory." She coloured slightly and broke off. "Hilda must have great confidence in this Mr. Hilliard. She is rather impulsive sometimes—I wonder how much she knows about him?"

"Only what I've told her, I suppose," said Eustace, "and what she gathered from meeting him at lunch."

"I suppose so," said Miss Cherrington, her tone somehow implying that any information Eustace might give would not weigh much with her. "Quite sure you don't want any more tea, Eustace?"

"Quite sure, Aunt Sarah," said Eustace virtuously.

"I think I'll just wash these things up myself. Annie will be doing your bedroom now. I want to save her all I can. She isn't very strong. If you could just open the door for me, Eustace."

Eustace sprang to his feet and knocked over his chair in doing so. One of the slender ribs in its false Chippendale back was seen to be fractured by the fall.

"Oh, dear," cried Eustace. "*I am* sorry."

Miss Cherrington paused, tray in hand, and looked over the edge of it.

"Never mind," she said. "It might easily have been worse. When I go out I'll get some Seccotine. I think our tube is nearly finished. With a little scheming I shall find time to mend the break. We'll let the chair rest for a day or two, and you must be careful how you lean back in it."

Shutting the door after her, Eustace sighed. He raised the fallen chair and sat down gingerly on another, conscientiously refraining from leaning back. Then, annoyed with himself for this illogical and poor-spirited behaviour, he suddenly threw all his weight against the chair back. It creaked warningly, and he started and sat bolt upright. Nothing seemed safe. He sighed again. What uphill work it was. He looked round the room to see if any of his cherished knick-knacks would launch a ray of sympathy. The bronze Kelim dog on the chimney-piece gnashed its teeth at him. In certain lights it seemed to be laughing but not in this one. 'Why does it always look as if it wanted dusting?' he thought irritably, and stroked it with his finger, but there was no dust, only that sullen, lustreless surface, deliberately tarnished, it seemed, as though to testify to the Chinese hatred of the shiny. He sat down again and wondered whether he should do his work here, where Annie would presently want to lay the table, or in the drawing-room which would take some time to warm up, and anyhow, Aunt Sarah, studying economy, did not like the gas-fire lit until teatime. He was trying to decide whether interruption was preferable to cold, when Miss Cherrington reappeared. She opened and shut one or two drawers, and then said:

"How old did you tell me this Mr. Hilliard was?"

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Eustace was surprised. He couldn't remember having told his aunt how old Stephen was, but he welcomed her interest in the subject.

"Nearly a year older than I am."

The answer did not seem to please Aunt Sarah.

"I had somehow imagined him older than that," she said. "Perhaps it was because you told me he would soon be beginning his career."

"Twenty-five isn't really young," said Eustace.

"Only relatively, of course. Youth ends with the acceptance of responsibility. For some this happens early, too early. They miss their youth, which is a pity. Barbara might well have waited a little, I think. But there comes a time after which it is unsuitable to cling to youth."

"Yes," said Eustace uneasily. He could see that from his aunt's point of view he was at once too young and too old, too young for his opinions to carry weight, too old to be at Oxford. Perhaps he would never be the right age. Against her standard of suitability—which was moral in origin, but with more than a dash of worldliness in it—he seemed to have no appeal. There was much to be said for suitability: it was the essence of good taste. His knick-knacks did not look right in this room because they were unsuitable; and perhaps that was why he did not feel right in it either. They were undeniably beautiful, he felt sure, in spite of his momentary exasperation with the Kelim dog, and might have retorted that the room was unsuitable to them. But Eustace did not feel he could adopt their argument. It would be safer to bring the conversation back to Stephen.

"Stephen would soon catch up," he said. "He's a very able man." He felt that Miss Cherrington would have to respect this definition. "I expect Hilda realized that, even at a single meeting."

"It's possible that she has seen him more than once," said Miss Cherrington.

Eustace was startled. "Oh no, I don't think so," he

said. "They're both too busy; besides, I should have heard."

Aunt Sarah looked as if he might not be as omniscient as he thought, and a doubt wriggled into Eustace's mind.

"Well," she said, rising. "I only hope this new arrangement about the solicitor will turn out satisfactorily. Hilda does not often make a mistake. Thank you for telling me, Eustace. I must get ready to go out now."

Aunt Sarah often thanked Eustace as it were for nothing, but this time there was real gratitude in her voice, and he was reminded of his resolution to try to meet her on a more human plane.

"Oh, where are you going?" he asked, with every appearance of interest.

Miss Cherrington turned round, surprised.

"To do a little shopping, and then to the bank. It closes early on Thursdays."

"Oh, does it? How tiresome for you."

"Bank clerks must have their holidays as well as other people," said Aunt Sarah. "Only this morning it does happen to be a little inconvenient."

"I should think so," cried Eustace, with what he knew to be an unsuitable display of sympathy. "I can lend you some money if you like."

"Thank you, Eustace, but I don't like borrowing, and I shall have to go some time." She turned away.

"Tell me," implored Eustace, throwing into his voice all the interest he could muster, "what other errands have you? Anything really exciting?" He felt the inquiry to be a little fatuous.

Miss Cherrington retreated a pace from the door.

"I'm going to the butcher's for one thing," she said. "I don't know if you would call that exciting."

"Oh, do bring back some of those delicious sausages," said Eustace. "I enjoyed them so on Saturday night."

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"We have had better, but I'm glad you appreciated them," Miss Cherrington said.

"They were absolutely divine," said Eustace. Noticing a shadow cross her face at his use of such an inappropriate epithet, Eustace added hastily, "Where else are you going?"

"To the grocer's, and then to the library, and then to the chemist's, if I have time."

"Will you have time for a cup of coffee at the Tivoli?"

"Thank you, I don't want to spoil my lunch."

"I adore chemists' shops," persisted Eustace. "All those fascinating new cures. They make one almost long to be ill, don't they?"

"They don't have that effect on me," said Aunt Sarah. "But if you're so interested in them, why don't you come with me, Eustace? There are one or two small commissions I could give you, and we should be back all the sooner."

"Oh *well*," said Eustace, dismayed at the turn the conversation had taken, "I don't think I could—you see, I ought to stay in and do this work. I'm a little behind-hand already, I'm afraid."

He glanced guiltily at the clock.

"I see," said Miss Cherrington, and Eustace felt he deserved the grimness in her tone. "And what will you be doing this afternoon, may I ask?"

"This afternoon?" said Eustace, as if that date, with all its obligations of time properly spent, were a century distant—"this afternoon?" he repeated; "why, this afternoon I thought of going to see Hilda. I've hardly seen her since the wedding. As you reminded me, it's Thursday, and Thursday is one of the days she sees people. I can telephone to her."

He seized the back of an undamaged chair, and from behind this bulwark gazed defiantly at Miss Cherrington.

"What sudden decisions you make," she said. "But I think this may be a sensible one. You will have

business matters to discuss with her. Would you like me to go with you?"

Eustace hesitated only a split second before saying "Oh, Aunt Sarah!" with a gush of delighted invitation in his voice, but he hesitated too long. Or perhaps Miss Cherrington had merely wanted to test a second time the genuineness of his interest in her morning's itinerary. At any rate she said, "Perhaps, after all, you had better go by yourself," and left the room with a dignity and an absence of visible disappointment that made Eustace feel more than ever ashamed.

It was not till Annie came in to lay the table that he remembered the letter in his pocket. He might safely open it now, for the thought of lunch provided all the artificial stimulus necessary to live through the half-hour before it arrived.

The address, a London club, was scratched out, and by the side was written, Anchorstone Hall, Norfolk. The words gave him a curious thrill, and he put the letter down for a moment before reading it.

DEAR CHERRINGTON,

I enjoyed my reunion with the Lauderdale so much that I feel I ought to give the Secretary official expression of my gratitude. Not the least of the good things of the evening was the pleasure of meeting you again. You made a mistake, I think, to absent yourself from the 'rag'—it was a really good show, quite in the old tradition—much better than my speech, I fear, but perhaps the one led to the other!

The war's over, but, as I said, we don't want the pendulum to swing *too* far the other way. At least I don't.

Funny, I saw a picture of your sister in yesterday's paper. I recognized her at once—she hasn't changed much, but of course she's more important-looking, and no wonder, having the charge of all those brats. I haven't much time for cripples myself, but I admire anyone who has, and I shall see if something can't

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be done about giving ventures like hers Government support.

You said you would like another look at the old house, so why not come down some time for a week-end?—and perhaps you could persuade your sister to come too, and give me the benefit of her views on Child Welfare! I'll get my mother to write to her, if that seems more in order, and we might have my cousin Antony, since he's a friend of yours, and my aunt, Nelly Staveley, who always enjoys meeting bright young men. Just a family party. I shall be touring round in May, so what about the first Sunday in June? Of course, if either of you can't come, we'll put it off, but I'm sure the College will excuse you, you must stand well with them after publicly disowning us bad boys the other evening! What fun it was, though.

My respects to your sister, and good luck with the books.

Yours,

DICK STAVELEY.

I called on Antony, at his suggestion, but need hardly say he was out.

On a third reading the sting in the tail of the letter shed its venom and seemed quite playful. As a matter of fact, by no means all the members of the Lauderdale had taken part in the rag; Eustace was not alone in declining its excitements, and he had certainly shown no signs of open disapproval. It wasn't only that he didn't enjoy smashing things up: he had his rather delicate position in the College to consider. He would explain that to Dick Staveley, who would of course understand . . . The rest of the letter was friendly.

How pleasant it would be to see Anchorstone Hall from inside.

The house had been a lodestar of his childhood, though for some reason it had always touched a negative pole in Hilda. She had refused to go when they

were jointly invited, and Dick had never seemed to want him without her. Nor did he now.

But the Hilda of to-day, who had knocked about the world, would surely feel differently. She might perhaps find Dick interesting; he was obviously interested in her, and in what she was doing.

Eustace abandoned himself to a day-dream. It passed through several stages, growing more ambitious with each.

'I'm just going to Anchorstone to spend a day or two with my sister, Hilda Staveley. Oh, didn't you know? Yes, in July' (Eustace's imagination never allowed much time for things to happen) 'at St. Margaret's, Westminster. We couldn't very well have the reception here, so Lady Nelly kindly lent us her house in Portman Square. But surely you knew, Stephen? We sent you an invitation. . . . The chicken-run? Oh, I expect she's forgotten about that now—she's given up the clinic—it was just a pastime really—she's busy trying to make Anchorstone a little more habitable—it's so Victorian—you must come and take a look at the old house some time—I'll get Hilda to write to you, if that seems more in order.'

He did not tell his aunt about the second letter, but when he started off for Highcross Hill, he made sure that it was in his pocket.

CHAPTER V

LADY GODIVA OF HIGHCROSS HILL

HIGHCROSS HILL was the other side of London, in Surrey. To get there took nearly two hours and involved a great many changes, not only of tram and train, but of tense and mood. With the ring of a conductor's bell-punch, the future hardened into the present; with the casual discard of a ticket, the present fluttered into the past. Drawing near to Hilda was a ritual. Eustace liked to approach his friends in this way; the successive stages were like purifications of his personality; other associations were dismissed, competing preoccupations were sloughed off, and he would bring to the encounter a mind like a clean slate, charged with expectancy—if a slate could be. The interest of seeing whether he was before or behind his schedule—for Eustace, like many unpunctual people, was exceedingly time-conscious—also helped, in its humble way, the process of perlustration. But to-day the process was not quite complete. His thoughts kept returning to the letter in his pocket. More than once he took it out and read it. When at last he arrived at Lowcross Station, it was still germinating in his mind, so that instead of waiting, as he usually did, to see the train dramatically disappear into the tunnel in the hill-side which almost overhung the platform, he brushed past the ticket collector and had to be recalled by one of those loud shouts, which always seem meant for someone else, to receive back the return half of his ticket.

The exertion of climbing the hill, however, pushed the letter into a lower stratum of consciousness. Eustace had been told to take hills easily. Highcross Hill could not be taken easily, but he had established certain rest stations at which he called, somewhat in the spirit of a railway train.

The fascination of this pretence had remained with him since childhood. He could be a fast or a stopping train, according to how fit he felt. To-day he was in good form. No signal-slack at the chestnut tree; no slowing down by the churchyard wall for repairs to the permanent way. He had reached the inn—appropriately called The Half-Way House—without a stop. The Half-Way House was a kind of Clapham Junction, and to wait there was compulsory. Alas! it was always shut at this hour; no chance of refuelling: the prosperous, brick-red face—heavily made up, Eustace felt, like a middle-aged barmaid's—was impassive over its legends of Saloon Bar, Private Bar, Jug and Bottle: a cynic openly exhibiting her broken promises.

Eustace spent two minutes' silence leaning against the square mast pole that supported the heavily flapping sign, and then, *Excelsior!* 'Try not the pass, the old man said'; but the youth paid no heed, because he had Hilda waiting for him at the summit. 'Dark lowers the tempest overhead.' Eustace glanced up; it had been raining, as befitted an April day, but the sky was now quite clear. 'The roaring torrent is deep and wide,' the discouraging voice persisted. There was no torrent: Eustace pressed on through the now semi-Alpine scenery. 'Beware the pine-tree's withered branch,' counselled the voice—the peasant's voice, speaking in English, for the Swiss were a cultivated nation. Sure enough, overhead there was a pine tree, and it had a withered branch. Exactly why the branch was dangerous Eustace had never understood. That it would fall off just as he was going under it was a supposition too unlikely to affright even the most timid. Longfellow's stalwart traveller would scout such a risk; and to climb the tree and sit on the branch would be meeting trouble more than half-way.

Unexpectedly, for he had been doing so well, Eustace felt a little out of breath, but to stop now would be against the rules. The next station, the Gothic lodge of Highcross Place, was round the

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bend, out of sight. He was undoubtedly panting: supposing he just stopped for once, here, where he was, without paying any attention to his self-imposed traffic signals? It was no disgrace for a train to stop between stations. He stopped, but his heart went on thumping. 'What shall I do?' he wondered, panic rising in him. Seeing the pine tree's withered branch, the youth decided to retrace his steps. There was no point in going on to die on a mountain top: nobody would be the better for it. As he descended the mountain the peasant and the maiden and one or two more came out from behind some rocks and said, 'Bravo, Eustace, you've done the right thing after all. None of us wanted you to go on. It would have been certain destruction.'

Eustace stood in thought, then began to go slowly down the hill. At once he felt better. But what shall I say to Hilda and Aunt Sarah? he thought. How shall I explain it? I shall have to say I had a heart attack; then they'll send me to a doctor and he'll order me to rest for six months. I shall miss Oxford, and I shan't be able to go to Anchorstone Hall on June the 3rd, and I shall never start to earn my living. He stopped again, and at once his breathing became more difficult. Oh, come now, he thought, *that* can't have done me any harm. And if I'm going to have a heart attack, I shall have it before I get home, anyway, so I might just as well have it here. He turned round. The maiden, the peasant and the two unidentified figures scrambled from behind the rock and besought him not to go on. 'You will rue it if you do!' they wailed. But the youth was obdurate, and pointed rather self-consciously to his banner.

Something seemed to be dragging at his feet; his heart swelled in his breast, and his steps came slower. Far below him he heard a cry: 'Beware the awful avalanche!' There was a roaring in his ears; the hill seemed to stretch up interminably into a great cone like the Matterhorn, and then without any warning

but the roar, the cone seemed to slide from its place and topple down towards him. Trees, telegraph poles, houses, were tossed this way and that, springing, bouncing, disappearing; last of all came the clinic, riding on the crest of a huge hollow breaker of earth and rock. Now it was right over him; he could see the nurses leaning out of the windows, their staring eyes alight with doom. As he gazed the front door swung open, but not inwards, outwards, and with such force that it was dashed from its hinges, and in the opening stood Hilda, her hand on the shoulder of a crying child. She looked down and saw him and made a sign he could not interpret.

It was all over in a moment. The roaring ceased, and Eustace was standing on the rather suburban Surrey hillside, among comfortable-looking villas, and not far from the top. His heart was behaving more normally. It must be a trick of the nerves, he thought; I've had something like it before.

The clinic crowned the hill. Through the gateway, with its red-brick pillars capped by stone balls, the whole front elevation of the building could be seen. The middle part was genuine Georgian, to which the former owners had built on a wing in the same style. Now the directors of the clinic were adding another, balancing it, to provide extra accommodation. The new part was still deep in scaffolding, but it had made great strides since Eustace's last visit. As he walked up the broad pathway, bordered on each side by a lawn, that led to the front door, he gazed with rapt curiosity at the rising annexe. The workmen were moving slowly to and fro, like spiders in a web. How could he, the static, be connected by such close ties with anything so progressive, so resurgent? Yet without him it wouldn't have come into being. He was a distant link in the chain of causation, but an essential one. Hilda's was the initiative behind the extension, but the money behind Hilda had been his. He put the thought away from him, disliking it, but a flush of

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proprietorship persisted, and he walked boldly across to the new wing and stood among the whitewashed barrels which held the scaffolding poles and all the intricate edifice of cross-bars and rigging.

"Look out, Governor," said a voice from above. "This pail of mortar's none too steady."

The abashed governor withdrew to a safe distance.

"Can you tell us the time, mate?" asked a stout man in a smeared overall which had once been white.

"Nearly half-past four," replied Eustace in Oxford accents which, he feared, would militate against matehood in the ears of the workmen.

"Another bloody half-hour," said the man, but he spoke with resignation not with rancour, and the remark was curiously soothing to Eustace's still uneasy nerves. The sun came out and washed the faded red of the house with a pinkish glow. Down the flagged path a nurse was pushing an invalid carriage, in which Eustace could see, propped on a pillow, the motionless face of a child. The nurse was hurrying, and the starched linen of her cap streamed out behind her.

The child turned its head and said something, and she leaned over it and said, "All right, you'll get your tea in a minute."

"And so will some of us poor b——s," observed one of the workmen in a loud aside, no doubt intended for the nurse's ears. She looked up and away again, and the man grinned down at Eustace and winked.

"Wish we were cripples, chum," he said in a friendly tone. "They don't half have a good time here. Nurses to dress 'em and bath 'em and kiss 'em good-night. And the boss is a real Lady Godiva."

The boss must mean Hilda. Feeling a little guilty, Eustace smiled at the man as knowingly as he knew how to, and wished him good-day. Then he went to the front door.

A maid with a hospital nurse's indefinable touch of authority answered his ring.

"Is Miss Cherrington in?"

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The maid's demeanour suggested that if she was she might not necessarily want to see Eustace.

"Have you an appointment?"

"Yes."

"What name, please?"

"Mr. Eustace Cherrington."

The maid pursed her lips and looked slightly incredulous.

Am I very shabby? thought Eustace. Was that why the workman called me "mate" and "chum"? It was not then the fashion at Oxford to take much trouble with one's clothes. Perhaps the maid was merely thinking that Hilda must be a phoenix without kith and kin. But her manner relaxed somewhat as she said, "Come this way, please."

After he had sat for a moment in the little white-panelled waiting room another, rather older maid came in. She looked mysterious and important.

"Were you waiting for Miss Cherrington?" she said
Eustace said he was.

"I will see if Miss Cherrington is free," said the maid, and went away still with her air of preoccupation. After a brief interval she reappeared, this time with an expression of amusement.

"Miss Cherrington will be at liberty in a few minutes."

The amusement was for him, of course. Eustace felt smaller and smaller. How much more important than he was this institution that he had helped to create! He was, and would always remain, the most private of private persons. No maidservant, certainly no succession of maidservants, would scrutinize his visitors, or defend his precious leisure from the incursions of the outside world. He would never have the kind of position that overflows the bounds of its owner's personality. and commands respect and awe in those who have never met him. He would never belong to the public, as Hilda had begun to do.

Something stirred in him. Could it be jealousy? He

hoped not. He did not mind taking a back seat. He rather enjoyed playing second fiddle. For this trait his friends at Oxford, dabblers in the new psychology, had found a technical, and pejorative, name. Eustace, defending himself, argued that it was humility, one of the foremost Christian virtues; but might the real explanation be that in acknowledging himself a poor creature, he was forestalling the criticism, and disappointment, of those who expected, or said they expected, 'great things' from him? Anyhow, he thought, Hilda is my memorial; she is making her mark in the world, she is my justification; she, the Lady Godiva of Highcross Hill. A flush of pride in her brought back to his mind the letter in his pocket—the letter that might bring them together again, partners in the same field.

The maid—the other maid this time—was again standing before him. She was struggling to keep a straight face, and Eustace felt irritated. What was there so laughable about him? Composing her features to an impersonal expression, she said: "Miss Cherrington will see you now."

He followed her across the white, light hall, up the broad, shallow staircase, to the door of Hilda's room. From inside came the sound of voices.

"Mr. Cherrington," said the maid.

Hilda was standing in the middle of the room, her face convulsed with laughter, and in a chair opposite sat Stephen, who didn't seem to know at all how to behave in the presence of this paroxysm.

"Oh, Eustace, it was so funny," Hilda burst out without preamble. "Mr. Hilliard had very kindly come down to see me on business—a bit of land at the back that we've been trying to buy for the clinic. I can't think why he came—it's such a small matter—but he did. So when I'd shown him round the clinic, as I show everybody, we went out to look at the new property, as Mr. Hilliard calls it. It's a chicken-run really, the man keeps about thirty fowls there. Well,

when he had assured himself that there were no Ancient Lights or other snags—of course I could have done that quite well myself—he said how interesting it would be to look inside one of the chicken-houses, and know what it felt like to be a hen. You *did*, Mr. Hilliard," she added, for seeing the incredulous, indeed shocked expression on Eustace's face, Stephen had opened his mouth as though to protest. "So he crept inside, and out of curiosity I followed—it was a squeeze, I can tell you. Then suddenly the thing tilted up—from our weight, I suppose—and for a moment we couldn't get out. It was just then that Alice came to look for me. Of course she couldn't see us, but she saw the chicken-house rocking up and down and heard us inside, and guessed what had happened. She's a farm labourer's daughter and knows about farmyard life, so she hung on to the end of the chicken-house, and brought it level, and we got out backwards, one after the other. I've never laughed so much."

Utterly irrepressible, Hilda's laughter returned and shook her from head to foot. Still lovely in mirth, she turned to share it with Stephen; he tried to join in, but with only partial success, and his pale face became as red as a beetroot.

"Well," said Eustace. "You have surprised me."

"We surprised everyone, didn't we, Mr. Hilliard?" said Hilda. "I believe the staff thought it just as funny as we did. How Matron will laugh when I tell her."

"I earnestly beg you not to," said Stephen, whose blush, after disappearing a moment, had returned. "Unless she knows already, as I fear she may. The effect on discipline would be deplorable."

The laughter left Hilda's face and her habitual sternness of regard returned.

Eustace noticed it with regret. "I don't know," he said; "discipline requires tension, but you can't keep tension up too long at a time or it will crack and bring about a revolution. Not that there would ever

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be a revolution here," he added hastily. "But if the tension is relaxed, as I think it ought to be for the sake of preserving discipline, mightn't it be better to relax completely, let go altogether, throw dignity to the winds, and—and revel in the hen-house, rather than unbend just a little, now and then, which is bound to seem self-conscious and patronizing, and means, also, that the tension is never really kept up? I know at school"—he turned to Stephen—"a whole holiday was far more liberating than a termful of half-holidays, and made one able to work better, too." He finished in some confusion.

"Bravo," said Stephen. "I never heard Eustace make such a long speech, did you, Miss Cherrington? Quite an oration. Perhaps there's something in what he says. In that case, you ought to ask me down at least twice a year to do a comic turn for the good of discipline. Only of course you'd have to help me."

Eustace was pleased to see that Hilda's good humour had returned.

"I won't forget," she said. "If the situation ever gets desperate, I'll call you in."

"I might have to wait a long time," said Stephen with a touch of wistfulness new to Eustace. "Ask me while it's still under control."

At this moment a maid brought in their tea. Eustace noted with satisfaction that her face showed the proper rigidity.

"One lump or two, Mr. Hilliard?"

"I sometimes ask for three."

"You shall have three."

"Hilda never allows me three," said Eustace enviously.

"Oh, you're often here," said Hilda. "This is Mr. Hilliard's only visit. Besides, he has come to see me on business."

"And on pleasure, too, said Stephen. "Does pleasure entitle me to another lump?"

Hilda smiled briefly.

"What report shall you take back to Messrs. Hilliard, Lampeter and Hilliard?" she asked.

"My report, if it deserves the name, is quite unofficial," Stephen said. "I'm not a member of the firm, in any sense, and shan't begin to be till the end of June, when Schools are over. But I shall say I still think they are asking too much. You say the directors of the clinic are financially rather conservative, Miss Cherrington?"

"It is like getting blood out of a stone," said Hilda vehemently. "I've had to fight for every improvement. I told them, at the last meeting, that if they would give half for this piece of land, which would be most valuable to us, I would pay the other half myself. But they refused. I expect it will end in my paying it all."

Stephen's face grew serious and he drew a longer breath.

"You must forgive me, Miss Cherrington, but I don't think that would be wise. I doubt if it's even wise to offer to pay half. I know how much the clinic means to you, but it's still only an experiment, though a remarkably successful one, and you have your own position to consider. You mustn't overspend yourself."

Hilda's long fingers brushed her brow.

"I hate counsels of prudence," she said. "If I had listened to them, this place would never have got on its feet. I don't want to sound boastful, but everything that has been done here, everything, has been done by me."

As her eye swept round the room the walls seemed to crumble and reveal the whole extent of the clinic.

"The new wing would never have been begun if I hadn't contributed to the cost. I loathe this cheese-paring policy. It never gets you anywhere. It hasn't in the country at large, and it won't here."

Eustace was deeply affected by the conviction in her voice.

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'I'll give her a cheque when I leave,' he thought. He felt in his pocket, but there was no cheque-book, only Dick's letter.

Stephen, however, stood his ground.

"I didn't mean to belittle your achievement, Miss Cherrington," he said, his wonted urbanity, banished by the incident of the chicken-house, gradually returning to him. "Only, as your lawyer-to-be, or should I say, your would-be lawyer, I feel you should not put all your eggs in one basket. I mean, you shouldn't identify your fortune with the fortunes of the clinic, however rosy they may appear. As I've had to tell Eustace more than once (he is very patient with me), money is not just an extension of one's emotions: it has a reality of its own which one ought to respect. If you pour money into the clinic and anything goes wrong, where would you be?"

At Stephen's rhetorical question Eustace looked terrified, but Hilda's unmoved countenance suggested she wouldn't mind where she was.

"And there's another thing," Stephen went on. "Tiresome as it is to wait, the natural pace at which things happen is the best pace. That way, there's less risk of dislocation; easy does it, as they say. Besides, the slower an undertaking goes, the more people can contribute and feel their interests are involved. If now, for instance, you rush this business of the chicken-run through, offering to pay the whole or even half, the directors, Naboth, and several people we've never heard of, will all feel slightly put out—'not consulted'—you know how people hate that—and will withhold their blessing; and so, though no doubt the thing will go through, it will leave a lot of animosities and sore places. Whereas if everyone takes a hand there'll be far less friction. Much better keep to what are called the usual channels, if you can."

How sensible, thought Eustace, completely won over by Stephen's reasoning and glad now that he had not brought his cheque-book. And what a relief for Hilda

to feel that she could sit back, and shelve responsibility, and watch things take their course. But to his dismay he saw from her stiffening face that Stephen's arguments had not impressed her.

"Mr. Hilliard, it's all very well for you to talk," she said, "but I *know* what happens when you leave things to other people. They simply get pigeon-holed. You wouldn't believe the state the place was in when I came here. The Matron drank; the children got bed-sores, they were so neglected; and I found out that when they were restless and troublesome the nurses sometimes put them to sleep with a whiff of gas. The directors either didn't know, or else they shut their eyes; they did nothing about it, and when I told them they pretended to be surprised. Unless I present them with an ultimatum about this piece of land—which means offering to pay—they'll argue about it till doomsday. Believe me, it's fatal to trust to other people."

Hilda's eyes were bright, and her breath came quickly; she made an impatient gesture as though knocking something away. Her beauty gained in power from the nervous excitement which animated it; Eustace was fascinated, and wished he had brought his cheque-book after all. But he could not gauge the effect of Hilda's outburst on Stephen, whose narrowed eyes seemed to be making a synthesis between what she had said and factors in the situation which she had left out.

"Is the clinic run as a charity?" he asked.

"Not exactly," said Hilda. "The patients pay according to a standard rate unless they are too poor to; then they pay what they can. A few we treat for nothing. Then there is the Subscription List to which you contributed so generously, Mr. Hilliard. We are trying to increase that, but the clinic will never be self-supporting. The deficit, which is still pretty heavy, is met by the directors——"

"Who are well-to-do philanthropists, I suppose,"

said Stephen. "Have you a contract with them, or any kind of agreement?"

Hilda smiled. "No, but they wouldn't be such fools as to quarrel with me."

"But you say they don't take much interest in the clinic?" said Stephen.

Hilda frowned, and looked thoughtfully down at the hands now folded in her lap.

"It wouldn't be fair to say that. No, they do take an interest—especially, as you know, in the financial side. They are not rich men for nothing, of course. But they're too cautious for my liking. I tell them so sometimes, I'm afraid. And they think it's enough to pass a lot of resolutions. As if a place like this could be run by resolutions."

A gleam appeared in Hilda's eye as she said this, but it faded, and for the first time since Eustace's arrival she looked almost tranquil.

"Well," said Stephen, rising with his air of conscious elegance, "I've got to get back now. The family hearth-side calls me. But thank you for a delightful afternoon, Miss Cherrington. I shall always remember the hen-coop. I shall say to my grandchildren, 'Little dears, I spent several minutes in a hen-coop with the great Miss Cherrington.'"

Hilda, who had also risen, coloured slightly.

"You must come again," she muttered. "One never knows when something may go wrong."

"Oh, I hope not, I hope not," said Stephen. "I don't want to be associated with a crisis—at least, not of that kind. I shall write to you, Miss Cherrington, and Messrs. Hilliard, Lampeter and Hilliard will also write. In due course, of course. Will you be able to wait?"

"I want to have this business of the chicken-run settled up," said Hilda stubbornly.

"Yes, naturally. Only don't forget the trouble that Ahab—wasn't it?—got into by being so—so impatient with Naboth. If only he had stuck to the usual channels, instead of calling in Jezebel!"

"I hold no brief for Jezebel," retorted Hilda, "but I seem to remember that Ahab tried the usual channels first."

"You have the last word," said Stephen gallantly. "I shall address myself to Eustace, who always listens to my advice. Good-bye, Eustace. Don't go breaking up St. Joseph's—you didn't know how destructive he could be, did you, Miss Cherrington? And don't let me hear that you have assisted your sister to buy the vineyard over my head. He's not to be trusted with money—he thinks it's just a natural adjunct of benevolence, whereas it's really like the *Peau de Chagrin*, and dwindles with every wish. Good-bye, Miss Cherrington."

"He's gone," said Hilda as the door closed on Stephen.

"Was he at all helpful?" asked Eustace cautiously.

"Well, you heard. He thinks that by haggling and bargaining we might save a few pounds."

"In that case the directors would pay for the field?"

"They might," said Hilda. "But when? I want it now, for an orchard and kitchen garden. There's hardly a fruit-tree on the place. They were all sold off when the estate was broken up."

"Could you plant fruit-trees in April?" asked Eustace dubiously.

"I'm sure you could. Why not? Oh, dear, how I wish people would mind their own business. What would Mr. Hilliard say if I went into his office and started telling him how to run it?"

"He hasn't got one yet," said Eustace. "He won't have, till July. But you asked him to come down, didn't you?"

"I said something quite vaguely, and the next thing I knew he was on the doorstep."

A tingle of pleasure ran through Eustace at this announcement. He looked anxiously at Hilda to see if she shared it, but her face, though less severe than

usual, had none of the elation that used to light up Barbara's in similar circumstances.

"Stephen always seemed interested in the clinic," he said, feeling his way.

"Oh yes, and he asked quite a lot of intelligent questions, in that funny, precise voice of his. A good many silly ones too, of course, like how many days off the maids had, and what they wore when they went out."

"The two I saw were new to me," observed Eustace.

Hilda gave an impatient sigh.

"Yes, I have to keep changing them. They don't seem to get the spirit of the place, somehow. These workmen unsettle them, I believe. I often catch them gossiping together."

"Well, I suppose that's only natural," said Eustace.

"It's not what they're here for."

"No—what did Stephen say about the new part?"

"He didn't like my having helped to pay for it. That's what I'm up against—oh, not in him especially, but in everyone. People are so cautious—one step at a time, don't bite off a bigger bit than you can chew. They've no vision, they can't take anything in their stride."

"I suppose Stephen has to be legal-minded," said Eustace, trying to turn the subject from the general to the particular.

"Oh, I don't mind it in him; but I should like to come across someone with more go for a change."

Eustace remembered the letter in his pocket.

"Do you know who I saw the other day in Oxford?" he said. "Dick Staveley."

"Dick Staveley?" repeated Hilda. "Dick Staveley? Do you mean——" She broke off.

"Yes," said Eustace. "The Dick Staveley we used to know at Anchorstone. The one who wanted you to go out riding with him, and you wouldn't."

There was a slight pause, then Hilda said:

"As a matter of fact, I do remember. I thought I'd

forgotten. Well, did he still want me to go riding with him?—because I shan't."

Eustace laughed.

"No, he didn't say anything about that. But he seemed to remember us quite well, and finding me in the wood, and seeing us playing on the beach together."

"I think we were quarrelling when he saw us on the beach," said Hilda.

"Oh no, we weren't," said Eustace. "No, no. I remember what it was. We weren't quarrelling, no, no. But I forget what I was going to say. Oh yes, he had read about the clinic and seemed most interested in it."

"All your friends seem to be interested in the clinic," said Hilda, with what almost amounted to a sneer.

Eustace was surprised at the change in her tone. She had been so sunny and serene. But, in spite of more than one experience to the contrary, he believed that with due care he could talk his way safely through his sister's moods.

"He seemed interested in you, too," he said.

"Oh, Eustace, how could he be after all these years?" said Hilda, with a flash of real irritability. "I should have thought Oxford would cure you of saying such silly things, but it doesn't seem to."

If the subject had been any other, Eustace would have taken this snub as final. But he felt impelled to go on, the more so because the businesslike-looking electric clock on Hilda's marble chimney-piece showed him his time was short.

As conversational approaches to Dick, both Hilda and the clinic had betrayed him; but the clinic was the safer, and he would try it again.

"He's a Member of Parliament now, that's why he's interested in the clinic," he remarked elliptically.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," said Hilda.

She looked very forbidding as she sat there, leaning forward with her chin almost touching her knees, and her eyes staring stormily into the electric fire.

"He said he thought the Government might take up the idea of the clinic," said Eustace, nervous but determined, "and give it a grant or something, and perhaps encourage the starting of others on the same lines. He said he'd like to talk to you about it."

"Oh, did he?" said Hilda. She got up from the sofa and walked away from Eustace to a corner of the room where there was a big square table between two long windows. On it stood a typewriter awash with a foam of papers. It looked like a rock, or perhaps a small hungry animal, and the papers were its food.

Still with her back to him, Hilda began to pick them up and sort them, putting them into two rectangular baskets which flanked the typewriter.

"What a pig's mess this room is in," she said. "Why can't Miss Pinfold keep it tidier? I shall have to speak to her."

The tidying of the table transformed the whole room, which suddenly became soigné and elegant within its grey-green plaster walls, picked out with panels of white moulding, at once graceful and severe.

"Why did Mr. Hilliard say you were destructive?" she said, returning to the sofa. "You couldn't hurt a fly."

She did not make it sound like a compliment, and Eustace at once imagined the room buzzing and crawling with blue-bottles, all needing to be swatted by his nerveless and ineffective hand. But to his relief not a fly was to be seen.

"Oh, that was just Stephen's joke," he said. "There was a little disturbance in the College—there often is, after a Lauderdale dinner. This time it was a bit more—well—pronounced, because, you see, Dick was there."

Directly the words were out of his mouth Eustace

regretted them and awaited a broadside from Hilda; but to his surprise she only said:

"What was he doing?"

"Oh, well," said Eustace, "he came down to address the Society, as an old member and a distinguished visitor. You don't read the papers much, so you wouldn't know about him. He did very well in the war, you know, and has won every kind of medal, including the Royal Humane Society's, and after the war he took a hand in our settlement with the Arabs—very dangerous work." Eustace dropped his voice in awe. "Well, his idea is that now the war's over we are likely to become too soft, and he feels he has a mission to toughen us up. I don't really agree with all that."

"I don't suppose you do," said Hilda. "But has he any practical suggestions?"

"I gather he thinks Parliament ought to talk less and do more, and would like the Executive to have a much freer hand. You know the system of checks and balances that Victorian publicists were so proud of—well, he'd like to see that done away. He would like to set up a number of Regional Commissioners, with plenary powers in their districts, who could just say, 'I want a dozen clinics like Highcross Hill in my department,' and the work would begin at once, without any waiting about."

"I see," said Hilda thoughtfully.

"And this morning I had a letter from him to say, would we go down to Anchorstone Hall for a week-end."

"Would *we* go?" asked Hilda.

"You and I."

Eustace expected Hilda to refuse at once, and the pause that followed had an unnatural, timeless quality.

"You go by all means. You always like meeting strangers. I shan't."

That was categorical enough, but Eustace, encouraged by the pause, said, "Oh, do come, Hilda."

"But why do you want me to go?" cried Hilda.

"Why do you want me to do something I don't want to do? I don't meddle in your life, do I?" she demanded. "Or if I do, it's just for your—for your——" But the word he was waiting for did not come, and Hilda went on after a moment. "But what advantage should I get from going to Anchorstone?"

"You could discuss the clinic with Dick," suggested Eustace lamely.

"The clinic, the clinic—it's always the clinic!" cried Hilda, using the word to lash herself. "I don't know why, but you try to get round me with the clinic. If Mr. Staveley wants to know about the clinic, he can write to me, or better still to my secretary, who will give him the illustrated brochure and all the details."

"But wouldn't you like to get away from here for a bit?" said Eustace, trying another tack.

"Perhaps I should, but not to go among a lot of smart people I don't know from Adam and who would be bored to death with me. We shouldn't have a thing in common, and I haven't the clothes for that sort of visit."

"But you could get some," said Eustace, surprised at his own persistence. "There's plenty of time. Dick doesn't want us until the first week-end in June."

"Oh, he's named a day, has he?"

"Well, he suggested that one. Would you like to see his letter? I brought it with me."

Eustace began to feel in his pocket.

"No, thank you. Well, as you've got it out, perhaps I'd better see what he *does* say."

Eustace handed her the letter. Hilda was a quick reader. Her eyes flicked to and fro, the whites were very blue. After a moment she laid the letter down.

"Why, have you read it already?" exclaimed Eustace.

"Not quite. I suppose I'd better finish it," and she took the letter up again.

"Funny kind of 'p's' he makes, doesn't he?"

"Oh, where? Show me," cried Eustace.

"Well, here, for instance." Leaning towards Eustace,

Hilda pointed to the passage with a long fore-finger reddened by work and cold winds. 'Important-looking'—and here too, 'Perhaps you could persuade.' 'Rather childish, don't you think?'

"Perhaps they are," said Eustace doubtfully.

"I wonder why he thinks me 'important-looking?'" Hilda remarked.

"You mean, he might have said something else?"

"Well, no; but he must always be seeing important people."

"You do look important in photographs," said Eustace

"Do I? Is that what the photographers mean when they say 'Not quite so stern?'"

"He looks rather stern himself, so perhaps he likes people who do," said Eustace.

Hilda turned the letter over once or twice.

"I couldn't tell him much about Child Welfare," she said. "I only know my own side of it. But I could put him on to people who do. He doesn't seem to care for cripples. There I rather agree with him—what we want is to turn them out healthy citizens."

"You could discuss that with him." For a moment, Eustace's imagination toyed with a picture of Dick and Hilda, their heads together, poring over large-scale diagrams of children with spinal curvatures and tubercular hips.

"Discuss, discuss," muttered Hilda. She gave the letter another glance and then handed it back to Eustace. "Thanks for letting me see it," she said. "But I don't think I'll go."

Eustace had expected this, but Hilda had shown signs of relenting, and the blow was all the harder when it fell.

"Oh, Hilda," he said, "it would have been such fun. We could have seen all the old places together, the rocks where we used to have our pond, and the lighthouse and the water-tower. They would all seem much smaller of course—not so—so important. I love to

think of those days when we were always together. We hardly ever are now."

Eustace sighed. Losing the future, he would lose the past too.

"They weren't always such happy days for me," said Hilda. "I've never felt so miserable in my life as I did the evening you ran away on the paper-chase. And then you were ill and they wouldn't let me see you. And then for a year or more you were always at Miss Fothergill's, and hardly had a word for us at home. And there was Nancy Steptoe, too, that silly, stuck-up little girl: you were always wanting to go about with her. And towards the end Father started drinking too much; of course, you didn't know about that, but I did. And then you went to school, and I was very lonely. No, I was thankful when we went to Wolverhampton and they sent me to the High School there."

Hilda's eyes smouldered at the recollection. "Poor Hilda!" Eustace murmured.

"After that there was the war and more anxiety about you, Eustace; it wasn't your fault, but I never had a peaceful moment while I thought you might be dragged off to the Front. You were always in my thoughts when those stupid V.A.D.'s used to talk about their boys and so on. They laughed at me for caring so much about you."

That Hilda could so pity herself made her the more pitiable to Eustace. He, he, had brought these woes upon her.

"I don't know why I tell you all this," she went on, "but you do see, don't you, that my real place is here at Highcross? This is where I'm happy and I never want to leave. I know that tiresome things keep happening, like this hitch about the field, and the servants giving trouble, and nasty, smelly little undercurrents that have to be nosed out and cleaned up. Human nature's awful the moment it's left to itself, it sinks into the lowest rut or drainpipe it can find. But that's just what I'm here for,

to find those things out and put them right. They don't really discourage me, or spoil what I feel when I come in and sniff the beeswax, and hear the whole place busy round me, holding me up, just as I hold it up. Come and look," she went on, leading Eustace to the window opposite. "It may not look much to you, but it's my life to me."

They stood side by side looking out. In the square, walled enclosure the grass was very rough, Eustace noticed now, but it shone golden in the evening sun, and the place was full of spaciousness and peace. Down in the valley lights were coming out; on the road which wound upwards on the left, the lamps were already lit. He could see them curving towards him. At one point a spur of the hill hid them; then, brighter and larger, they reappeared.

The foreground fell away, only the distance was visible. The elm trees in the hedgerow that bounded the meadow beyond the garden wall might have stood on the edge of an abyss, so distinct were they, so shadowy and ill-defined their background.

"You see why I'm so fond of it, don't you?" said Hilda.

"I do," said Eustace.

"And why I don't want to go away even for a night?"

"Ye—es. But you'd be coming back again."

"Are you still thinking about Anchorstone Hall?"

"Well, if it didn't do you any good to go, it couldn't do you any harm."

Hilda turned away from the window.

"I wonder why you're so anxious for me to go?" she said sharply. "It can't be simply because you know I don't want to."

"I think you'd enjoy yourself once you got there," said Eustace, half-heartedly using an old formula.

"No, I should feel like a fish out of water among all those Society people. I shouldn't do you any credit. I should just be a handicap to you and an embarrassment."

THE SIXTH HEAVEN

Eustace was touched by this rare mood of humility in Hilda.

"You've read Dick's letter. It's you they want, not me."

"I'm not just being disobliging," Hilda said. "I have an instinct against going. Are you thinking that if I didn't they'd find some excuse for not asking you?"

Eustace blushed.

"Well, that's what happened before, when we were at Anchorstone."

"And you were disappointed?"

"Yes, but not only on my account. I wanted to see you in that setting, with everyone saying how lovely you were, and opening the door for you, and picking things up for you, and asking if you wanted to do this or that—like a princess, you know."

Hilda said nothing.

"I'm sure you wouldn't feel shy or nervous. It would be different if you'd only been asked casually. But Dick made such a point of it, and he's the only son, after all. You couldn't feel you weren't welcome."

"All right," said Hilda. "Since you want me to go, I'll go. But if it's not a success, you'll be to blame."

"I'll take the risk," said Eustace gaily.

Keen as a pang, bright as a sword, a shaft of joy transfixed him. Reason could not tell him why, but his whole being was flooded with happiness, and he felt as though nothing could ever go wrong again. Was it because almost for the first time he had bent Hilda's will to his? Such a victory would be cause for elation, but not for this astonishing sense of well-being which went through him like wine, flooding the dry, dusty corners of his nature, blunting the thorns and prickles which pierced his consciousness the moment it heard the call to happiness. So strong was the pressure of the feeling, that he was unable to stand still, and began to walk up and down in front of the electric clock, muttering to himself.

Hilda gave one of her laughs.

"I wish you could see yourself," she said. "You look so funny."

Under the liberating effect of movement the tide of joy had equalized its flow and achieved a perfect balance of possession. There was now no part of him to which the life-giving ichor had been denied.

"You *have* made me happy," he said. "I never felt so happy before."

"That's your destructiveness coming out," said Hilda. "You look forward to seeing me sacrificed on the social altar. When you were a little boy you used to play at being a tidal wave or an earthquake or the Angel of Death. You were always destroying things—in your imagination, of course."

Eustace could remember the access of power that glorified his being when he had overwhelmed Pompeii and Herculaneum. But surely that had nothing to do with this transforming sense of lightness and release—as though he had been reborn, as though a weight had dropped off him. What was the weight, and where had it gone? Why this sensation of relief as if all his life he had been suffocated?

"I'm going to throw you out now," Hilda was saying, "or you'll be terribly late for Aunt Sarah."

For once Eustace was proof against the dread of a scolding. Unaware of motion, he floated downstairs. Half-way across the beeswaxed floor Hilda stooped and picked something up. It was a pigskin glove, hardly worn.

"Why, that's one of Mr. Hilliard's. Now I shall have to post it to him. I wish people wouldn't leave their things behind. I'd almost forgotten he was here, it seems so long ago."

CHAPTER VI

THE STAVELEYS IN CONCLAVE

THE Banqueting Hall at Anchorstone, and the kitchens leading off it, were the oldest part of the house, all that was habitable of the building put up by Roger de Staveley at the end of the fifteenth century. The kitchens had rooms above that were still used by the servants, but the hall itself had none, and was much in its original state, except that in some places the indented battlements had been renewed. Built of red brick, with a low-pitched lead roof capped by two louvres, it looked smaller and less impressive outside than in. This was partly because the level of the courtyard had risen, docking the doorway of two feet of its former height. The family habitually used this entrance, inconvenient as it was in wet weather. The other way in, by the kitchen below or the minstrels' gallery above, had the advantage of being under cover, but it meant a long journey through passages and up and down stairs, whereas the courtyard door could be reached in a few strides from the door of the New Building.

The New Building was L-shaped. Anchorstone Hall, as it now stood, would have been a hollow square but for the gap, half as long as one of the sides, between the Banqueting Hall and the New Building. A light railing, with a wrought-iron gate in it, stretched across the gap, fencing off the courtyard from the garden.

The blue clock in the tower above the gateway showed two minutes to half-past one as Sir John Staveley emerged from the Victorian doorway of the new wing and walked across the uneven surface of the courtyard to the Tudor doorway of the Banqueting Hall.

His hair showed almost white under the dark-grey

cap that he always wore to make the transit. His clothes were dark grey too, their cut was the cut of twenty years ago; the breeches, tight round the knee, looked in the distance rather like Court breeches. The stockings that covered his thin, well-shaped legs had as little pattern as was consonant with not being perfectly plain. They were the country clothes a clergyman might have worn, but there was nothing clerical in Sir John's bearing. Although he walked with a slight stoop and seemed to feel the inequalities of the ground, his step was almost jaunty, and did not need the assistance of his stick.

He went down the short flight of steps into the Banqueting Hall, on to the daïs, and straight into the glorious glow of the big window. At almost any time of day its greenish gold panes gave the light the tones of sunset. The other windows were set high in the wall, in Tudor fashion, and little but the sky could be seen from them; this one was the whole height of the wall and built out into a bay, so that it seemed to gather the garden into the room. On the daïs was the dining-table, shrunk to its smallest size, hardly more than a square. Here they sat in summer, but in the winter it was too draughty, and they used the refectory table that ran down the body of the hall.

Sir John laid his cap and stick on their accustomed chair and took out his watch. "Does her ladyship know it's time for luncheon?" he said to the butler.

The butler was used to this query, for it happened every other day. Not that Lady Staveley was unpunctual, but Sir John, though by no means a martinet, could not bear to wait a moment for his meals. "I'll go and see, Sir John," he said. As he opened the door a girl stepped through.

"Good morning, Anne," said Sir John, and kissed her. "What have you been doing with yourself all this fine morning?"

"I've been doing the flowers for one thing," said Anne, "and then I walked down into the village and

did a few things there." Her face lit up as she was speaking and became almost animated; when she ceased the interest flickered out, and was replaced by the look of a grey day, not sullen or lowering, but as though resigned to the unlikelihood of change. Her grey flannel suit fitted her beautifully, but like her expression it had the air of reducing all occasions to one.

"I congratulate you on being so usefully employed," said her father. "and on being so punctual, too." He paused, as if searching for another subject for congratulation, and then said, "I think we had better begin. Your mother wouldn't want us to wait. What's happened to Crosby?"

"I think you sent him away," said Anne.

"So I did, so I did. I'm always forgetting." The door opened. "Ah, here's her ladyship. Edith, we were just going to begin without you."

Plump and a little out of breath, Lady Staveley sat down with her back to the window, and Crosby gently propelled her chair towards the table. Two footmen did the same service for Sir John and Anne. The diamond and the turquoise rings glinting on her short, chubby fingers, Lady Staveley began to rearrange her spoons and forks: this was a rite, and no one spoke till it was performed. She looked a comfortable, motherly woman at first sight, but her face in repose had the coldness of authority and a touch of pride.

"I've had a busy morning," she said. "So many things to see to. Did you know the flower show was to be on the twenty-first?"

They both admitted ignorance.

"Yes, and Bates is quite beside himself. He says we shall have nothing worth showing."

"He always says that," said Anne. "He sent in some quite nice flowers this morning."

"Yes, and how beautifully you've arranged them," said Lady Staveley, looking at the six small silver vases filled with early sweet-peas, and done with such a

careful eye to symmetry that you could not tell one from another.

"Oh, I don't know!" Anne regarded her handiwork without enthusiasm. "They have different ways of doing flowers now, all in a heap with reds and pinks together, which clash to my eye. I'm afraid my ideas of floral decoration are rather old-fashioned."

"Well, we're old-fashioned people," said Lady Staveley comfortably, "and they suit us. Did you do the flowers for the bedrooms as well?"

"I did," said Anne. "I tried to make them a little different—the men's and the women's, I mean—the men's blue and plain and upstanding, the women's pink and fussy and drooping, but it was too much for me, and in the end I made them all alike."

"No wonder," said Sir John. "I never heard such a fanciful idea. And why do people want flowers in their bedrooms, anyway? I don't suppose they ever look at them. I won't have 'em in mine—I always knock 'em over. Of course, if you're an invalid it's another matter. But they ain't healthy: even in hospitals they put them out at night—shows that they poison the air."

"Anchorstone isn't a hospital now, thank goodness," said Lady Staveley energetically. "Those days are over. And I shouldn't like any guest of mine to find a bedroom with no flowers in it. We're not quite barbarians yet."

"All right, my dear," said Sir John, who seemed content to relinquish his opposition rôle. "Have it your own way. I was only trying to lighten your burdens, or rather Anne's. By the by, who is coming this afternoon?"

Lady Staveley waved away a plate of ham which had appeared as a supplement to the meat course.

"Well now," she said, and wondered where she should begin. The names seemed to hang back, like guests unwilling to take precedence of each other in going through a door. She felt surprised at this, for she

was not a woman subject to hesitations or second thoughts.

"There's Dick to begin with," she said.

"Oh yes, he's coming back from stumping the country," said Sir John. "He'll be tired, I expect."

"Dick's never tired," said his mother.

"Political meetings are much harder work than bamboozling a lot of Arabs," Sir John observed. "Who next?"

Again Lady Staveley took a look into her mind and found the names reluctant to come forward.

"Then there's Nelly," she said.

"Oh, Nelly, it's a long time since we've seen her. What's she been up to, I wonder?"

"She's in London," said Anne. "I spent two or three nights at Portman Square. She had a musical party—some foreigners playing in a quartet—and a lot of people came to it."

"Bohemians, mostly, I suppose?" said Sir John. "Don't expect you knew any of 'em."

"I did know one or two," said Anne, with a touch of spirit. "And there were some older friends of Aunt Nelly's whom we all know."

"Watching the circus, I suppose?" said Sir John.

"Well, they didn't exactly mix, but I think they quite enjoyed meeting the lions."

"Like the Christians in the Coliseum, I should fancy," Sir John said. "Nelly always did like that kind of thing. Still, there's no accounting for tastes."

"It wasn't quite my cup of tea," admitted Anne, half wishing that it had been.

"I should think not. Well, who's to keep Nelly amused? She'll be bored to tears with us."

"Oh, nonsense, John," said Lady Staveley. "Of course she won't. She's lived half her life in the country, and she's far more practical than you think. She used to take a great interest in local happenings at Whaplode in the old days; she was always getting up plays and entertainments for the village

people and helping with charities. She was adored there."

"I know people say that," said Sir John; "but I've heard a different story, that the villagers didn't really relish her benevolent intentions and were terrified at being dressed up as Lady Macbeth and Julius Cæsar and being made to dance round the Maypole, and drink lashings of hot soup, however ill they felt. Anyhow, she won't have time to get up entertainments here; so what are we going to do for her?"

"Well, we shall have Antony."

"Antony? Antony who?"

"Helen's Antony—Antony Lachish."

"Oh, he's coming, is he? We *are* honoured. I know that people do find him amusing, but personally I can never hear a word he says. And he's so restless, always jumping about, and fading away, like a will-o'-the wisp. And he looks so delicate—not that that's anything against him, I dare say. When he was a child Helen let him go about too much with grown-up people and over-stimulated his brain. Such a pity. Anyhow, he never turns up; he's chucked us twice at the last minute. What reason have you for thinking he'll come?"

"I had a telegram from him an hour ago," said Lady Staveley, with a controlled air of triumph. "Here it is. 'Arriving Anchorstone six-twenty-eight. Love. Antony.'"

"Pooh, love indeed," said Sir John. "Love in a telegram. What are people coming to? I don't suppose he loves us very much. Still, let's hope he does turn up. He'll take Nelly off our hands a bit. Who else is there?"

Anxious to get the ordeal over, Lady Staveley made another dive into the aquarium. The next fish seemed easily caught.

"There's Victor Trumpington."

"Good," said Sir John shortly. "Always glad to see Victor."

Anne coloured slightly, but made no comment.

"And then?" said Sir John. "Or is he the last?"

"By no means," said Lady Staveley, wishing that he were. She felt that perhaps the week-end bill of fare would sound more palatable to her husband if it came from Anne, for he was seldom irritable with her. So she turned to her daughter and said:

"I'm getting muddled, Anne. Who else is there?"

Anne knew what her mother's chief difficulty was, but declined to help her out.

"Didn't you say Monica was coming?"

"Monica?" said Sir John, helping himself to a piece of cheese. "Why, she was here only the other day. I remember, because Dick should have turned up and he didn't. Kept somewhere tub-thumping. I thought she seemed a bit disappointed, but it wasn't our fault. Still, she'll see him now, if that's any consolation to her. She's a nice girl, Monica, you know where you are with her. No frills, no nonsense, good with a horse—a nice outdoor girl. So that's the party, is it? Let me give you a glass of port, Edith. You'll need it before Monday morning comes."

He pushed the decanter towards her.

Lady Staveley exchanged glances with her daughter. It was no use putting off the evil moment. She reminded herself, as so often before, that her husband's bark was much worse than his bite. He was like a dog who made a great demonstration in front of the horses, but it was she who held the reins. Nevertheless, she broke an almost invariable rule and poured herself out a half a glass of port.

"You must be patient," she said. "That isn't quite all."

"What?" said Sir John, pausing with his glass half-way to his lips. "Do you mean there's someone else coming?"

Anne bent her head over the coffee tray, which the footman was handing to her, and fixed her eyes on his large red hand, and said, with the idea of postponing any outburst till the servants had gone:

"Shall I pour your coffee out for you, Papa?"

"That's very kind of you, my dear. Three spoonfuls of sugar and no milk."

She handed him the cup. "And now shall I light your cigar?"

"That's most obliging of you."

Over the match she watched the servant's figure retreating down the hall. Only just in time; for Sir John, unmollified by his cigar, immediately returned to the attack.

"Did you say there was someone else coming?"

The short breathing space had given Lady Staveley time to rally her forces.

"Yes," she said, with a flourish of ironical defiance. "There's Miss Hilda Cherrington and Mr. Eustace Cherrington."

It was out.

"Who on earth are they?"

"Miss Hilda Cherrington," said Lady Staveley, speaking slowly and patiently and rather loudly as if she were addressing a foreigner or a refractory child—a bluff that on such occasions she sometimes tried—"is the Secretary of the Clinic for Crippled Children on Highcross Hill. That's right, isn't it, Anne?"

Anne nodded.

"Never heard of her," said Sir John.

"Perhaps not, because you don't move in high medical circles. She's doing an extremely fine work there."

"But what's she doing here?" asked Sir John.

Lady Staveley stirred her coffee.

"It's rather a long story, but I'll make it as short as I can. Miss Cherrington and her brother lived in New Anchorstone when they were children, and he was the little boy who got lost in the park one wet day, with Nancy Steptoe, Major Steptoe's daughter, and Dick happened to pass by and heard her calling for help and brought them in here. We gave them some dry clothes and a hot drink. The little boy had a heart

attack or something, and was very ill afterwards. You probably don't remember: it all happened years ago."

"I do begin to remember something," said Sir John. "But you haven't explained to me why, after we've managed to get on without each other all that time, you've suddenly invited them to spend Saturday to Monday with us."

Lady Staveley sighed. "You go on, Anne," she said. "You know the next part of the story better than I do."

Anne disclaimed such knowledge. "All I remember is," she said, "that Dick and I and Nancy and Gerald Steptoe were riding on the sands towards New Anchorstone, and Dick was grumbling because there were no castles or rock gardens to trample on, when suddenly we saw two children in the distance and he called out, 'Come on, let's ride over them!'—you know how he liked to give people a fright. When we got a bit nearer Nancy told us they were the Cherringtons, who were friends of hers, and we pulled up. They seemed to be having a quarrel. She was going for him with her spade, and he was looking at her helplessly, like a rabbit with a stoat."

"I hope they won't do that when they're here," said Sir John.

"Dick said we must stop her killing him, and told Nancy to ride on and congratulate the boy on having been left some money by old Miss Fothergill."

"You remember her, John?" said Lady Staveley. "An old lady, half paralysed, who lived with a companion."

"Of course I do. One of the pillars of the place. Great pity she died."

"She couldn't live for ever, Papa. Well, they didn't know about the legacy, and Dick asked me if we should tell them and I said yes. Then Dick introduced me to the sister——"

"How did he come to know her?" demanded Sir John.

"He had been to the Cherringtons' house while the boy was ill to ask after him, and met her there. She didn't say very much: she seemed shy and angry. I suppose it was because of the quarrel."

"Was she pretty?" asked Sir John. "Though I suppose you could hardly tell at that age."

"She was rather pretty," said Anne. "I remember Dick said something about her coming over to see us, but she never came. That's all I know. Mama will tell you the rest."

"I can only tell you what Dick told me," said Lady Staveley. "The boy made good use of his money, and got a scholarship to Haughton and then another scholarship at St. Joseph's——"

"Did he, by Jove," said Sir John. "He must have been what we called a 'groize'."

"And when Dick went down the other day to address some society there, he found that this Mr. Cherrington was the secretary, and I suppose they talked about old times."

"I still don't see where the sister comes in."

"Oh, that's to do with politics. Dick wants to know about Child Welfare, and so on, and as this seems to be Miss Cherrington's subject he thought he would pick her brains."

"Couldn't he have done that in London?" said Sir John.

"Well, you know how he loves showing people the house, and he wanted to see the boy, who's thought to be promising, and is fond of old houses, so it seemed a good opportunity to ask them both. She seems quite a nice girl, judging by her letter."

"I expect she is," Sir John said, absently. His indignation appeared to be cooling, now that he knew the worst. But it would be a pity to abandon the fire while the embers were still glowing. "What I want to know," he demanded, "is, who arranged this party?"

"Dick and I between us," Lady Staveley said, "with

some help from Anne. Do you see anything to object to in that?"

"I think I can guess who chose who," Sir John said darkly. "And where are you going to put them all?"

"What an extraordinary question for you to ask, Papal!" Anne exclaimed. "Do you really want to know?"

"Well, I suppose it's my house."

"Nelly is in the State bedroom. Monica is in the Magnolia room, Miss Cherrington is in Anne Boleyn's room, Victor is in the Nelson room, and we've put Antony and Mr. Cherrington in two of the tower rooms, where they'll be company for each other. Antony likes to have someone to talk to."

"He does indeed," said Sir John feelingly. "Where's Dick's room?"

"His sitting-room?"

"No, I know which that is. I mean, the room where he sleeps."

"He's got King Henry's room," said Lady Staveley. "His own is being done up."

Sir John looked as if he would have liked to find fault with this arrangement, but all he said was, "I suppose that's all right."

"You can alter them if you wish, dear," Lady Staveley's voice was suave. "The cards are all in the doors, but they can easily be changed."

"I'd know what to do with them if I had my way," said Sir John, but it was a tired thunderbolt and fell quite harmlessly. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go and have a nap now," he said. "Do you want me to be on duty at tea-time?"

Lady Staveley felt she could afford to be magnanimous in victory.

"Just as you like, dear; Antony and the two Cherringtons are coming by the six-twenty-eight. The others are all motoring down unless Dick comes in his plane."

"Hope he won't do that," said Sir John, rising. "I

don't like this new idea of his. Cars are quite bad enough. The boy's too reckless: he'll end by breaking his neck."

Lady Staveley was ruffled out of her usual composure.

"Don't talk like that, for Heaven's sake," she said, almost sharply. "I wish he wouldn't, too. Perhaps one day he'll get tired of taking risks."

Sir John, who was gathering up his cap and stick, was heard to mutter something. Then his steps clattered up the polished stairs and the door closed behind him.

Left to themselves, mother and daughter exchanged sighs of relief, and as far as their notions of deportment allowed them to, slumped in their chairs.

"All things considered, I think that went off very well," said Lady Staveley. "You were a great stand-by, Anne."

"You'd never guess, would you?" Anne said, "from the way Papa talks, that he really enjoys having people to stay? I think he enjoys it more than we do."

"He has none of the responsibility," said her mother.

"I know. When they come he'll be all affability and old-fashioned courtesy and blame us for not doing enough for them. I shouldn't be surprised if he took quite a fancy to this Miss Cherrington."

A shadow passed over Lady Staveley's face. Her eyes, which generally beamed with good humour, turned slightly hard, and her small, well-shaped, aristocratic nose, usually in retirement between the bulwarks of her plump cheeks, suddenly asserted itself.

"There's no telling whom he'll like," she said. "We've been married all these years and I still don't know. But I think it would be quite a good thing if he did find Miss Cherrington interesting to talk to."

"There'll be Monica," said Anne thoughtfully.

"Yes, dear Monica. I was afraid she might not be able to come at such short notice."

"I thought you managed the Infant Welfare part wonderfully," Anne said. "Even I found it quite convincing."

"I'm always a little nervous about Dick's sudden fancies," said Lady Staveley. "And he's so headstrong. We don't know anything about the girl: she might take him seriously. I never knew a man so restless. I expect it's just another whim. After all, he hasn't seen her for fifteen years; she may have changed completely."

"Perhaps it'll be like that time when he made us ask Miss Vandernest down, do you remember?" said Anne, "and he took against her the first evening and wouldn't speak to her, and went out all the next day and left her on our hands?"

Lady Staveley laughed.

"Yes, it was a great nuisance, but it was also a good riddance. . . . If I knew how to put someone in an unfavourable light I should be tempted to do it, for her sake and his."

"Oh, you do know, Mama."

"Not when Dick is concerned. . . . And fifteen years. It's odd he should have remembered her all that time. I wonder what she's like? I suppose a hospital nurse sort of person. They're often very pretty."

"He told me she didn't like him," said Anne suddenly.

Lady Staveley looked serious again.

"Oh, he has spoken to you about her?"

"He just told me that," said Anne. "Perhaps she's fond of old houses too, not only to look at."

"That's the most plausible explanation, but she doesn't sound quite that sort of person."

"Then I wonder why she is coming?"

The answer to that they never knew.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHRINE OF FANTASY

ALL the house-party, except Lady Nelly Staveley, had arrived, saluted their host and hostess, and dispersed to their rooms to change for dinner. Stretched in his bath, Eustace let his mind dwell on the events of the past hours. He tried to imagine what Hilda was doing, but since she parted from him, under Anne's escort, at the drawing-room door, he had been unable to visualize her; she would not come at his call. The play of circumstance, tampering with reality, had severed them. This was a new experience, and it left him at once uneasy and elated. Despite the nervousness, all his feelings tended to elation; they soared up in him like bubbles in champagne.

He was here, in the shrine of fantasy, that was the great thing, in the very scene of so many waking and not a few sleeping dreams. And Hilda was here too. It was a fulfilment.

The long journey had passed quickly, beguiled by the inspired impromptus of Antony's conversation. Eustace was afraid Hilda might be shy and distrustful with him, for he had a frivolous way of talking, and the seriousness of his mind he kept for ideas, not for the practical issues of life. But he was insatiably curious about people, and few could resist the very evident interest he took in their lightest remarks. Talking came as naturally to him as breathing, and every breath he drew seemed to discharge its oxygen into his mind, sometimes to the neglect of his body. Sitting beside Hilda, whose face glowed with health, he looked terribly tired; his face was grey, and there were shadows on his temples. Once or twice he dropped off to sleep almost in the middle of a sentence; his head rolled on to his shoulder, almost on to Hilda's,

his mouth fell open and he even snored; but so deeply had the spirit left its mark on his features and on his slight, thin body, that even in these moments, when most people would have seemed completely animal and a little disgusting, his physical envelope never lost the impress of his mind, and when he came to himself it was instantaneous, like the switching on of a light. Nor did he find any difficulty in the transition between talk and silence; they flowed naturally into each other, and when he wanted to read he took up his book and did so. Social constraint could not live near him, he banished it, and with it many tedious preoccupations that, for Eustace, clogged the machinery of living. What matter if they lost their luggage? What matter if the train broke down? What matter if Lady Staveley hadn't after all been expecting them and sent them away to find rooms in an hotel? Such disasters were infinitely unimportant while Antony Lachish talked.

This sanguine mood persisted to the very gateway of Anchorstone Hall; survived the crossing of the moat and the opening of the great door; endured while they walked across the courtyard, framed by unfamiliar buildings that looked down on them with critical eyes, and did not fail when the door opened to reveal the impassive Crosby flanked by his two aides in their silver buttons.

Crosby had begun to talk to Antony in low and solemn tones about the disposal of their luggage, a question which would have driven any competing thought from Eustace's head. But Antony brushed it aside with rapid gestures and torrents of incoherent speech, and this method seemed effective, for the man inclined his head, as if satisfied, and, his demeanour imperceptibly changing gear, led the way with slow steps in a diagonal direction across the hall. Hilda and Eustace followed at a distance, but Antony crowded on to Crosby and, barely waiting for the door to open, glided rapidly round a screen and into the room.

Before they were half-way across he had reached the fireplace, where four or five people were standing in attitudes, as it seemed to Eustace, of critical expectancy; and he flung up his arms with the movement of a bird learning to fly and cried, "Here we are!"

Thus the ice was broken. There were many questions that Eustace still wanted to ask Antony, but he had disappeared. Finding he had arrived without a black tie, he had rung the bell, in his own room and then in Eustace's, but there was no answer to either summons.

"I don't like it," said Antony. "Dick has arranged for us to be isolated here like the Princes in the Tower, beyond the reach of help and where our screams can't be heard. He might do anything to us."

Warning shadows gathered on Antony's face; Eustace began to feel nervous. "I think we had better look behind the arras."

He gave the blue-green tapestry, which Eustace thought must be priceless, a disrespectful tug, and peered behind it.

"No, that plan would be too obvious for him," he said. "I expect defenestration is what he has in mind."

Eustace followed him to the window. Below them in the moat, dark clusters of lily leaves stood out from the brown water. The park lay in front of them. Stunted and gnarled and silver-green from exposure to North Sea weather, the trees looked very ancient, rising from the long shadows in their gold-washed carpet. Many were out at elbows and none seemed to have their full complement of leaves. They only came half-way up the church tower, which looked out serenely over them. To the left, along the wall, was the oriel window of Antony's bedroom.

"I expect that's the one he'll choose," Antony said. "But I must die in a black tie. I'll go and borrow one from him; I'll beard him in his den while you are having your bath."

"Do you know where he is?" Eustace asked.

"No," said Antony, "but by the system of trial and error I shall find out. You must pray for my safe return."

The bathroom was hardly more than a cupboard between their two rooms, and smelt strongly of steam. The window was too high up, Eustace noticed with relief, to lend itself to defenestration. He wondered if Hilda had a bathroom to herself, or whether she was sharing one, as he was—perhaps with Anne, perhaps with Monica whose other name he hadn't caught. He hoped she wasn't feeling lonely.

When they suddenly decided it was time to go and dress and the party broke up, he hadn't noticed how she was looking, he had felt so pleased to be going off with Antony. Anne had taken charge of her, perhaps a little with the air of finding it a duty. At any rate, not quite with the look he liked to see directed at Hilda.

Eustace would have gone to her room, but he wasn't sure that it would be correct, and he was anxious, as always, not to do anything that was not correct. Besides, he did not know which her room was, and the passages might not be well lit, and he might find himself in someone else's room by mistake. She was somewhere in the main building, her door guarded perhaps by red fire-buckets with Anchorstone Hall on them, as his was, and printed instructions what to do in case of fire. Perhaps a maid would have unpacked for her, and she might be feeling that her things were not as good as other people's and the maid would smile at them and tell the other maids. She had very little jewellery, only one or two brooches of their mother's, and her garnet engagement ring; and the necklaces that he had given her, of an antique and arty kind. He had liked them at the time, but didn't feel so sure of them now. Hilda didn't care in the least for such things, and never wore them.

But at any rate she would have his watch. Her birth-

day had been in May, and he had insisted on presenting her with a wrist-watch set in diamonds. It had cost a great deal, but Eustace's pleasure in making a gift mounted in direct ratio with the price: the satisfaction of the donee counted with him much less. Hilda had shown remarkably little satisfaction, and would gladly have refused the gift. Indeed he had only persuaded her to take it by saying that he ought to share the expenses of her wardrobe.

Actually, with her salary, her income was larger than his, but she was hard up because, in spite of Stephen's opposition, she had contributed something to the buying of the field. It made Eustace uncomfortable to think that her preparations for this visit should have put her out of pocket. To the last she had protested against going; even on the station platform she had protested: he might have been leading a sheep to the slaughter. It would have been a dismal journey but for Antony. If she had guessed that he got the watch partly with the idea that she might wear it here, she would never have accepted it. Perhaps she wouldn't wear it after all. Perhaps she was wondering whether she should or not, and meanwhile wishing herself back at the clinic. Did women wear wrist-watches at dinner? Eustace couldn't remember, and Hilda wouldn't know. If only he could have seen her face as she was led away. His imagination still seemed unable to get into touch with her.

But he must get out and leave the bathroom ready for Antony, who had so little idea of time and would almost certainly be late for dinner—a prospect Eustace dreaded. He pulled the plug out, and wrapped himself in the ample bath-towel, and was just examining the mat to see whether Antony's statement about the family tree being embroidered on it was correct, when the door opened and Antony burst in.

"I've got it!" he cried, waving a black tie. "But I'm

sure there is something odd about it—it feels so peculiar. Do you imagine it could be a keepsake from a dying Arab? Perhaps it's poisoned, like the shirt of Nessus; perhaps it'll turn into a snake, a Black Mamba or the Speckled Band, and throttle me half-way through dinner. I'd better try it on."

He pulled off his own tie and threw it down, narrowly missing the bath, then put Dick's on under his soft collar.

"What huge wings it has—like a vampire bat. Just the kind of tie Dick would have."

With Eustace's sponge he wiped the perspiring looking-glass.

"It's much too long," he lamented. "I shall look like Mr. Gladstone."

"Tie a knot in the middle," suggested Eustace. "It won't show under your coat."

"What a good idea—how inventive you are. Do you suppose Dick'll mind?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Eustace doubtfully.

"He might make it an excuse to hang me with it," said Antony. "Would you have thought he had such a thick neck?"

"I suppose he's fairly big all round," said Eustace.

"He is," said Antony. "When I went into his room he was stark naked, and his skin fits him like armour-plating—it's almost disgusting. His body is like a lethal weapon. There's something repellent in sheer masculinity."

"No doubt he didn't expect you to find him like that," said Eustace, drawing his bath-towel round him.

"I don't know who he was expecting, but he didn't seem surprised. He just pointed at the chest of drawers with his long, hairy arm, and said, 'At the top on the left.' " Antony began to tear his clothes off, flinging them on to whatever ledges the bathroom provided. "Don't go away," he said, "or if you do, leave the door open so that we can talk."

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the sound of swishing and splashing, then Eustace, who had begun to dress, heard Antony say:

"What did you think of Monica?"

"I hardly had time to take her in," said Eustace.

"She's a nice girl, a good, useful girl. You won't have any difficulty with her. She's ready to talk about anything. She's not brilliant or even clever, but she bowls a good length."

Eustace was surprised to hear this sporting metaphor from Antony's lips.

"She's an orphan, you know," Antony went on, "and being rather well off she goes about a good deal. She's almost a bachelor-girl, I think you might say she was a bachelor-girl, but she's not at all hard-boiled. She plays golf and lawn tennis very well. She's not quite the Staveleys' type."

"Why not?"

"She's not old-fashioned enough. But I dare say they think she could stand up to Dick."

Eustace digested this in silence. Then he said, "Do you think she could?"

"I doubt it," said Antony. "She'd put up a good show, but I fancy he's looking for something more exotic, more like a butterfly on the wheel. There wouldn't be any fun in breaking Monica. She'd stay on for a few revolutions, longer than anyone else has, and say, 'What fun this is,' and then she'd get off in good order, only a little damaged."

"But you think she might take him on?" said Eustace, pleased with himself for being able to keep up the worldly tone of the conversation.

"She might think it worth while," said Antony.

Eustace felt his spirits go down. How little he knew about the rules of this world which he had crashed against so casually, like a moth bumping against a light! Monday morning would soon be here and the whole experience over, leaving at Anchorstone Hall not so much as a ripple on the moat or a faint displace-

ment of the leaves of the water-lilies, to show he had been there.

"Tell me about the other man," he said, "I scarcely spoke to him."

"Victor Trumpington?" said Antony. There was a tremendous commotion and upheaval in the bathroom—a sound of tides in conflict such as might have accompanied Archimedes' famous experiment. "Victor Trumpington?" he repeated, appearing at the door in his bath-towel, his hair standing on end. "Oh, he's just a man in the Foreign Office whom everyone likes. No party is complete without him. He's a tame cat par excellence."

Ignoring the rest of his body, Antony bent down and dried a little toe with extreme thoroughness. He could not, Eustace remembered, establish the smallest routine in anything he did, however mechanical. Now he was rubbing his left wrist—the delicate bone whitened under his assault.

"But there's another reason for his being here," Antony went on. "He and Anne have been trying to marry each other for years. It seems so obvious—perhaps that's why they don't do it. Or perhaps they're both waiting in case they meet somebody they like better."

"She seemed rather nice, I thought," said Eustace.

"She *is*, but she's so dull, poor girl," said Antony, gazing reflectively at his right knee, without, however, doing anything to it. "How could she be anything else? When they were in London, she was never allowed to take a step alone—someone always went with her, even for a walk. And I suppose Dick's being rather wild made them feel they must be all the more careful with her. She never saw the flash of a latch-key or any token of freedom. She was absolutely *immured*."

"Couldn't Lady Nelly Staveley do anything to help her?" asked Eustace.

"Oh, but she only went to Lady Nelly's (when she came out, I mean) under the strictest guard, the most

lynx-eyed supervision. Sir John and Cousin Edie never approved of Lady Nelly. They even blamed her for not having children. She longed for them; but with Freddie what could you expect? I mean, you couldn't expect. . . . In spite of his toping, he was much more agreeable and popular than they were, which I suppose was a grievance; and of course she was adored. Outside Anchorstone the name Staveley just means Lady Nelly."

"I look forward to seeing her," said Eustace.

"I envy you," said Antony. He began to rub his hair with tremendous vigour, though there was no sign that it had ever been wet. "Someone once said, 'Oh, that I could meet her again for the first time.' Double-edged, like most compliments."

A clock on the chimney-piece struck the half-hour.

"Good heavens!" cried Eustace, "it's half-past eight. We really must hurry."

Dread of a scolding was one of the few motives strong enough to make Eustace overcome his inveterate dislike of telling anyone to do anything. But Antony was unmoved.

"I believe that all the clocks in this house except the big one are kept ten minutes fast," he said. "'Always in time, but never in tune,' should be the motto of the Staveleys. They ought to write it up everywhere."

When Eustace looked round from tying his tie, Antony was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

BILLIARD-FIVES

THE drawing-room proclaimed its Victorian origin. The ceiling was decorated with a pattern of diamond-shaped parterres, outlined in a light-coloured wood, each lozenge framing a representation of the arms of the Staveleys or of some allied family. By a discreet rolling of the eyes Antony had drawn Eustace's attention to this feature when they first arrived, but it was much more in evidence now, because the top lights—unshaded bulbs hanging at the intersections of the lozenges—had been turned on, directing a hard glare on the heads of those below. Hilda had her back to Eustace—an unfamiliar back because much of it was bare—but she turned round when he and Antony came in and her look said, 'You've got me into this mess, now you must get me out.'

Victor Trumpington, a tall, rather willowy man of about thirty with a fair moustache, was standing a pace or two from her, with the air of having been beaten off, and wondering whether to renew the attack. Everyone—it seemed to Eustace—looked as though they had tried conclusions with Hilda and been worsted, so separate from each other did they seem, so absorbed in chewing a private cud, so enclosed and islanded in themselves. Eustace's eyes dropped before Hilda's, he could think of nothing to say to her, so he sought out Lady Staveley, who was standing by the fireplace. In her black velvet dress and diamond necklace, she looked smaller and less approachable than she had in her rather thick, purplish tweeds.

"Did you find your room all right?" she asked, and Eustace said it was a lovely room.

Her eyes made him a slight acknowledgment of this politesse, then switched to Hilda, who was now in

conversation with Antony—though conversation was not quite the word, for each was staring at the floor as though the other had made a remark too profound to be answered. Eustace did not remember having seen Antony nonplussed before. His tie was working round to one side, soon the bow would begin tickling his ear. Involuntarily Eustace turned to Dick. The charge of bull-neckedness did not seem to be justified, but Dick had such a good figure, and wore his clothes so well, that he seemed smaller than he really was. After what Antony had said, Eustace half expected to see him with horns and a tail, and was almost disappointed that he looked so ordinary, and, like the others, not quite at his ease.

"Your tie seems restless on Antony," he said, and Dick smiled and said, "It's a wise tie and knows its own master," but his eye, too, wandered to Hilda.

It was not that she was exactly overdressed in her stiff blue silk, which shimmered silvery white on top where the light caught it; her appearance was so striking that she hardly could be. And the dress, which Eustace had helped her to choose, only looked a little more expensive than a dress ought to look. But Hilda had not come to terms with it; it covered her, up to a point, but did not clothe her. Anne and Monica seemed to have grown into their simpler dresses; Hilda's stuck out from her in every sense. They had damped down their personalities to a discreet glow, whereas Hilda wore hers like a headlight. It shone from her eyes, her mouth, which he had prevailed on her to redden, her skin, which was a revelation to him, and her expression, which registered everything she thought. She proclaimed herself; she stood out from the others almost as much as if she had suddenly shouted.

In his imaginings of her début at Anchorstone, this was how Eustace had wanted her to look. He could see now that it was a mistake. But she wasn't a lamp that could be turned down, she had to blaze, and the more

uneasy she felt, the more she clashed with her surroundings, imparting, as it seemed to Eustace, her discomfort to everyone else. When the butler offered her sherry she first refused, and then at Antony's instigation, awkwardly took a glass. The unaccustomed wine flew to her face and flamed there; it was a conflagration, and Eustace had no idea how to put it out.

Sir John Staveley looked at his watch.

"It's a quarter to nine," he said, shattering the silence; "shall we wait for Nelly, or shall we go in?"

Almost as he spoke the door opened and Lady Nelly advanced into the room. You could not call it walking, for she seemed to get nearer without moving. She was a tall woman and upright, except that her head drooped slightly in perpetual acknowledgment (it seemed afterwards to Eustace) of the qualities she had which made people love her, and of the qualities she loved in them. Her smile seemed to have arrived at no special moment, it was there; and as she came towards them it moved from face to face, changing its nature in a way that was perceptible to each recipient, but perhaps to no one else. She paused beside Hilda, half turning her head, and then went on.

"Am I late?" she said. "I'm so sorry."

She sounded surprised at herself, as if she had never been late before, as if it was slightly comic, and an opportunity for everyone to be indulgent to her.

"No, you're not late, Nelly," said Sir John; "you're just in time for some sherry."

She took a glass from the butler's tray with a half-wondering air, as if it was too much to believe that such a rarity could be offered; and letting her glance stray round the company, until it touched, without quite resting, on Hilda, she said, "What nectar!"

The tension in the room relaxed, and Sir John, coming forward, said, "I don't think you've met Miss Cherrington."

Almost before he spoke Lady Nelly had turned to Hilda and taken her hand.

"What a lovely dress," she said. "I adore that colour."

Conversations sprang up like a wind.

Eustace could hardly believe he was in the same room, so homely did it look. Even the coats of arms ceased to press down threateningly and melted into the ceiling, symbols of battles that had long ago been fought. He was content to be lost sight of in the general relief, the more so that Hilda's face, level with Lady Nelly's, had lost its look of strain and was actually smiling.

Sir John said something and there was a collective movement away from the fireplace. Eustace was preparing to let them pass him and to fall in at the rear, when he heard Lady Staveley say, "How remiss of me. I'd quite forgotten. Nelly, I must introduce another guest—Mr. Eustace Cherrington."

Eustace stopped, stemming the advance, which halted round him; and Lady Nelly, imperceptibly disengaging herself from Hilda, bent upon him a look of recognition apparently tinged with surprise that this meeting had been so long delayed.

"Miss Cherrington's brother?" she said. "How delightful. I never had a brother." She spoke as though a brother was the most desirable and the rarest thing in the world; and as she brought her slow look of comic wonder to rest on him, Eustace felt valuable and valued as never before.

"Now don't stand gossiping, Nelly," Sir John was saying. "I will take you, Antony shall take Edith, and the rest of you must sort yourselves out." He extended the crook of his arm to Lady Nelly, and she slipped her hand through it, with a faint touch of coquetry, faint, but as infectious as the smile which, since she launched it, had become general.

"We thought you were never coming," was Lady Staveley's greeting when at last Sir John brought the men back from the Banqueting Hall. "Not that we

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missed you, we just wondered what had happened to you. I nearly sent someone to see, because I knew how disagreeable John would be if he didn't get his rubber."

"Dick was telling us of his scheme for benefiting the young," said Sir John with a glance towards Hilda, who, as Eustace expected she would, turned away. "He was quite eloquent on the subject. Now who's for a game of Bridge? Don't all speak at once."

After some hanging back it was decided that he and his wife and Monica and Victor should make up the bridge four, and they went into the next room. "Now what shall we do?" said Dick. "What would you like to do, Aunt Nelly?"

"I think I shall just sit here," said Lady Nelly, "and remember that admirable dinner."

Eustace saw that such an inactive way of spending the evening did not appeal to Dick.

"I don't feel as if I'd had enough exercise," he said. "Don't laugh, Anne; you're always laughing at me."

"You should have walked here," said Anne, "instead of coming in an aeroplane."

An aeroplane! Eustace looked at Dick in awe. How could Anne take such a feat so casually?

"I shall have to give up flying," said Dick; "it doesn't suit my liver. How about a game of billiard-fives? Do you play billiard-fives, Miss Cherrington?"

Hilda said, a little shortly, that she hadn't played any game since she left school.

"Would you like to learn?" asked Dick.

"You couldn't ask her to play that," Anne interposed. "And after dinner, too. It's an appallingly painful game, Miss Cherrington, and tears your hands to ribbons."

"Miss Cherrington wouldn't mind a little thing like that," said Dick, and to Eustace's astonishment he heard Hilda say that she supposed she could try.

"Splendid," said Dick, before anyone could get a word in. "Now who else shall we have? Anne plays,

she's a dab at the game. She carries a most useful right hook and her cheating is superb. Only we can't play on the same side, because we irritate each other. It's my fault really."

"I don't like being given so much advice," said Anne. Eustace noticed that Anne seemed to keep her end up with Dick better than anyone else did.

"Miss Cherrington won't mind me giving her advice," said Dick, "because she says she's a learner. Now who would like to be the fourth?" He looked inquiringly from Antony to Eustace. Eustace was conscious of a longing for invisibility.

"Come on, Antony," said Dick. "I know you can play. I remember in the old days how dangerous you were with those fairy taps at the top of the table. Your short game used to be wonderful, subtle to a degree. You always were an expert at in-fighting."

Antony seldom declined a challenge addressed to his social conscience.

"Very well, Dick," he said, with a glance at Eustace, "I'm ready for you."

"Good man," said Dick. "We'll leave Eustace to look after Aunt Nelly. He can talk to her about books. But of course they're free to cut in whenever they like. We may easily have a casualty. I shall rely on Miss Cherrington with her medical experience to bind up our wounds. The First Aid Post is in the housekeeper's room—we pass it on the way. That's where the stretcher-cases are always brought. Good-bye, Aunt Nelly—you both look as if you wished you were coming with us."

Eustace signalled to Hilda with his eyebrow, but in vain.

Shepherded by Dick's tall figure, they crossed the floor, a ragged group, and the door closed on them.

Lady Nelly turned her face up to the solitary Eustace, and he found himself sitting beside her on the sofa. Of his former visit to Anchorstone the impression that stuck in his mind most vividly was the

plenitude of sofas. There were in fact four. This was the smallest; it had wings like an car-chair, and only held two.

"He likes getting his own way, doesn't he?" said Lady Nelly. "But I don't quarrel with the arrangement."

Eustace felt that this civility demanded another, but it would not take shape in his mind, because that forum was already occupied by another preoccupation.

"Is billiard-fives a really dangerous game?" he asked.

Lady Nelly laughed.

"Were you thinking of your poor sister's fingers? No, not really dangerous, though I dare say Dick will make it as dangerous as he can."

"I shouldn't like her to get damaged," said Eustace, whose fears could sometimes be charmed away by the repeated pooh-poohings of an older person.

"Oh, I'm sure he'll take the greatest care of her. You'll smile, but I played the game oncc. It's stopping the hard ones that hurts. She'll be playing with him, so they won't come to her."

Eustace had the comfortable sensation that he need not be anxious about Hilda.

"But what a lovely girl your sister is," Lady Nelly went on. "I don't wonder you don't want to see her with a black-eye. You must be very proud of her. Why has nobody told me about her?"

Something in the tone of Lady Nelly's voice made Eustace ask:

"Has anyone told you about me?"

Lady Nelly smiled. Her wide face had more firmness in it than one expected from her rather vague, dreamy manner. Her features might have been called blunt, for all their finish; to Eustace they never seemed quite visible, some effluence of her personality lay over them like a ground mist, and sometimes her spirit seemed to retreat, leaving her face untenanted save by its beauty; then her smile, which was never

twice alike, gave her back to herself. Now she was answering his question:

"Why, naturally. I've heard a great deal about you from Antony. But I won't embarrass you by telling you what he said."

"He told me about you, too," said Eustace.

"How curious you make me. Dear Antony! What did he say?"

Eustace was suddenly overwhelmed by a vision of all the things that must have been said to Lady Nelly—witty compliments flashed at her by men of letters, tender compliments whispered by Edwardian gallants, standing behind her, bending over her chair; stately compliments uttered by kings on their thrones, and acknowledged by Lady Nelly with an inclination of the head or even a curtsy.

There was a whisper of voices from a hundred grand or brilliant or intimate occasions in the pre-war past; but none of them was audible, not one gave Eustace a lead.

"Well," she said, "was it too bad for you to tell me?"

The idea of inventing something occurred to Eustace, to be instantly vetoed by his conscience. If only he could remember what Antony had said! Antony belonged to Lady Nelly's world; he understood its conventions, and even if the remark, on another tongue, did not sound quite right, still Eustace would not be held responsible for it. But what *had* Antony said? Something about the Staveleys not approving of Lady Nelly? That wouldn't do. Something about her husband having drunk himself to death? That would be worse. That everyone adored her? That would be much too intimate. He remembered a phrase and snatched at it.

"He said it was you who put the Staveleys on the map!"

The corners of Lady Nelly's eyes began to crinkle, her wide mouth grew wider, and she laughed and laughed.

"Don't think I'm laughing at you," she said. "But it is so funny. Did he really say that? What a strange expression—I never heard it before. But I'm afraid that my respected in-laws wouldn't agree."

"He said no one had ever heard of the Staveleys until you married Mr. Frederick Staveley," said Eustace, encouraged by his success, and hoping he was not being too disloyal to his host and hostess.

Lady Nelly laughed again. Recovering, "You must forgive me," she said. "Only no one ever called him Frederick. I don't think I've heard the name till now. You mustn't think me heartless," she went on with a bewilderingly quick change to seriousness. "But it was a long time ago. Poor Freddie. You could hardly have known him," she went on, still in her mind defending herself from a charge of callousness that Eustace was far from bringing. For a moment she looked extremely sad, and Eustace began to feel that he had spoilt her evening, that he was a cad, an egregious ass who didn't know how to talk to a stranger, above all to a woman of beauty and fashion and fascination, and that he ought to apologize or sound an immediate retreat to the billiard room—anything to rid her of the incubus of his presence.

"No," she said suddenly, and the negative, though it was not so meant, seemed to be an answer to his thoughts. "No, I was thinking about what you said—what Antony said. It's all such ancient history now. When I married Freddie he hadn't a penny—I mean, about a thousand a year."

She raised her eyebrows, and her amethyst-grey eyes, resigned and sad but with a question in them, sought Eustace's, as though expecting sympathy for her union with this beggarly income. He, quickly revising a life-time's training not to talk about money with a stranger, but unable to think of a thousand a year except as riches, gazed at her in doubt, and said at last:

"It doesn't seem very much."

"No indeed," said Lady Nelly. "But Freddie was

so good looking. Not quite with the distinction John has, but romantic, rather like Dick. It was the coal-mine in Derbyshire that really put them on the map, as Antony calls it, not me."

"Are they very rich now?" asked Eustace reverently.

"Oh no, just comfortably off. This is a nice little place, isn't it?"

"This?"

Eustace felt he could not have heard aright. What did she mean? He gazed round the big room whose corners were hardly visible now that the top lights were silenced.

"Oh, I don't mean this monstrous mausoleum of heraldic tuft-hunting," said Lady Nelly. "No, the house itself. It's got charm, don't you think? Big houses are so overpowering."

Desperately Eustace tried to adjust himself to Lady Nelly's standards.

"I suppose they are. . . . But aren't the Staveleys a very old family?" He assumed that a member of one old family would be interested in the antiquity of another. But to his surprise Lady Nelly, like Antony, did not seem to have given the matter much consideration.

"I suppose they are," she said vaguely. "Yes, of course they are. Much older than ours, for instance. I'm afraid we were only Elizabethan profiteers and land-grabbers, mushrooms compared with the Staveleys. In that sense they've always been on the map. Are you interested in genealogy, Mr. Cherrington? I believe it's a fascinating study. I've a cousin who spends his life at it."

"I seem to like the idea of anything old," said Eustace, hoping that this simple-sounding admission would clear him of the charge of snobbery.

"Then you must come and see Whaplode," said Lady Nelly. "I shall be most happy to show it to you. The estate wasn't entailed and my father took no interest in his Tasmanian cousins, so he left it to me."

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It's only mine for my life, so you must hurry up. But I'm not sure the house would be old enough for your austere requirements," she continued teasingly. "It's a great barn of a place, but I'm afraid most of it only goes back to the eighteenth century."

"Oh, but I should love to see it, Lady Eleanor," cried Eustace, feeling that so magnificent an invitation excused, nay demanded, the use of her Christian name.

But to his discomfiture she burst out laughing.

"Well, you shall," she said. "But for Heaven's sake don't call me Lady Eleanor, call me anything you like, but not that. Nobody has ever called me that. I shouldn't answer to it—I shouldn't know who you were talking to."

"I'm so sorry," muttered Eustace, wishing the earth would swallow him. Not knowing where to look, he turned his eyes upwards. The massed insignia of the Staveleys returned his scrutiny with a cold and hostile stare.

Lady Nelly was still laughing.

"Don't worry," she said. "I shall always remember you as the one person who took my name seriously, as it ought to be taken. Eleanor sounds so distinguished and mediæval—I think I shall ask everyone to call me Eleanor in future. Only then I should have to live up to it, and be an Eleanor. Do you think names influence their owners, Mr. Cherrington?"

Eustace wondered if Hilda would have been different had she been called, say, Joy.

"To me, it's the owners who influence their names," he said.

"In the case of strong personalities, perhaps they do," said Lady Nelly. "But all the same, a name has its own character, I think, and some people seem well named, and others not. May I know what your name is, Mr. Cherrington?"

Eustace was seized with bashfulness. Every kind of inhibition and taboo leapt up, demanding that his name should be kept secret. Not only that, it seemed a

poor, wretched name, too silly and insipid to repeat. Oh, to have been called Valentine or Horatio. But Lady Nelly was waiting; she must be astonished at the time it took him to answer a straightforward question.

"It's Eustace, I'm afraid," he said.

"Why afraid?" said Lady Nelly. "It's a charming name, and suits you, if I may be allowed to say so. Of course now I remember, Dick called you Eustace." She paused, as though to enjoy the sound of his name on her own lips. "But somehow he made it sound different. Or am I being fanciful?"

"I like it better the way you say it," said Eustace in a low voice.

"Then will you object if I call you by it?" asked Lady Nelly.

"No," muttered Eustace. "Please do." He looked at her a moment. In looking at anyone there is usually some obstacle that meets and mars one's vision, turning it back on itself—a hair out of place, an unresponsive line in the attitude, an unsympathetic or dead patch somewhere. Eustace could see no flaw in this crystal. He turned away, his face inadequate to what he felt. But just then the door opened, letting in a rattle and a tinkle which rapidly increased in volume, and he saw Crosby coming towards them, with a footman close behind, each carrying a tray loaded with glasses, bottles, jugs, siphons and decanters, a sparkling array.

"Lemonade, orangeade, ginger ale, hot water, my lady?" intoned Crosby.

"What a galaxy! I'll have some orangeade, thank you, Crosby," said Lady Nelly.

"What can I give you, sir?" said the butler.

Eustace hesitated. He had already drunk a good deal, and whisky was known to lie uneasily with champagne.

"He'll have a whisky and soda," said Lady Nelly firmly. "I might have had one if you'd offered it me."

The butler's face relaxed and his acolyte even grinned.

"It's not too late, my lady," said Crosby, his hand poised over the decanter.

"Tempter, begone," said Lady Nelly histrionically. "Mr. Cherrington can have my share."

Eustace took the whisky gratefully.

"I see you have difficulty in making up your mind," said Lady Nelly, when the clinking and jingling had died away. "Are you always like that, or was it just bewildered greed at the sight of so many drinks?"

Braced by the whisky, Eustace tried to be more expansive.

"I'm a martyr to indecision."

"Oh, come now," said Lady Nelly, "you're much too young to be a martyr to anything. At my age one begins to be a martyr. But surely when you're still at Oxford, and have done as well as Antony tells me you have, all you need do now is just go ahead—as I hear your sister has."

"Hilda is much more go-ahead than I am," said Eustace. "I expect she's really one of the reasons why I'm not."

He was astonished to hear himself say this, and had there been such an invention as a word-eraser he would have at once applied it.

"Tell me a little about yourself," said Lady Nelly. "We've talked far too much about me. I'm such a threadbare subject." She smiled at him. "So far, all I've heard about you is praise. Now I want to hear the other side."

Eustace took another sip. The room was perfectly quiet save for an occasional encouraging crackle from the quite unnecessary log fire, which, despite the rivalry of the lamps around them, flickered on the oyster-coloured satin of Lady Nelly's dress and gleamed in miniature flames on the pearls in her necklace. The invitation to unburden himself was like a gift handed to him on a silver tray; to reject it

would be churlish, and an unexampled snub, for no one, he felt sure, had ever refused Lady Nelly anything.

The sentences did not come easily at first. Eustace had no idea in what guise he wanted to appear to his listener—he tried to confine himself to the facts, but the facts must seem such small beer to her, with her totally different range of experience. He tried to make them sound more impressive than they were; then he was ashamed of himself, and adopted a lighter tone, with an ironical edge to it, as if he well knew that these things were mere nothings, the faintest pattering of rain-drops on the spacious roofs of Whaplode. But he thought she did not like this; once or twice she gently queried his estimate of events and pushed him back into the reality of his own feeling. Eustace shrank from being taken seriously; he liked to think he did not matter, for then the disappointment he was fated to cause would not matter either. His ingrained moral outlook demanded that there should be a villain of the piece, and the bent of his mind made him accept that rôle; but it was distasteful to him, sitting there talking, not to a confessor, not to Stephen, but to an unknown grande dame whom he should be entertaining with light, after-dinner conversation, while in the next room his host and hostess were playing bridge, and in the billiard-room, down some passages, beyond the housekeeper's room, where people were taken when they were hurt, Hilda and Dick Staveley and some others were laughing and perhaps screaming over a rough, dangerous game, which he hadn't wanted to play. It didn't seem suitable, the tremolo, the throb in the voice, the whine (could it be?), the tendency to unbosom himself, the undeclared request for absolution from this august yet melting presence beside him on the sofa.

The feeling that while he appeared to shoulder the

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blame himself he was inferentially casting it upon others was also distasteful to him. To undress in public was bad enough; to strip beyond the verge of decency people who were not there to answer for themselves was worse. Yet Lady Nelly's face, which had as many expressions as the moon in a cloud-swept sky, as many glimmerings as her own pearls in the fire-light, did not seem to be accusing him of spiritual indelicacy; and surely, he thought, she should be a judge of that, she should know, better almost than anyone, when taste was being offended against. But of course if she did know she would never show it; he almost wished she would get up, drawing the oyster-coloured satin round her, and say, 'Enough of this washing of your soiled, discoloured cotton, Mr. Cherrington. It displeases me; it disgusts me; I don't want to hear any more. I regret having suggested that I should call you by your Christian name. Please consider the suggestion withdrawn. I am going to say good-night to my host and hostess. You can carry your confessions into the billiard-room, or anywhere else you like. Good-bye.' But nothing of the sort happened; nor could Eustace afterwards remember by what gradations, and in response to what promptings, he was released from the downward drag of diffidence and the heady preenings of self-conceit, and was stabilized more or less at his own level.

"Well," said Lady Nelly at length, "you *have* Boswellized yourself. I believe that for all your air of shyness you really love hearing the sound of your own voice. You must never pretend to be tongue-tied again."

Her sunlit irony was more precious than praise, and Eustace, who in the reaction from his recital had begun to be flooded with self-distrust, took heart.

"Now I think we ought to do something practical," Lady Nelly went on. "Perhaps you don't think me practical, but I am." Her smile began, and died away almost at birth; flower-like, it could show every stage

of fulfilment between the bud and the full-blown. "You said you didn't find it very easy to work when you were at home?"

Eustace felt that he had said too much.

"I didn't quite mean that."

Lady Nelly brushed this aside.

"I was reading between the lines. Now what I'm going to propose is this. I've taken a house in Venice for July and August and September: it's very old, fifteenth century, so you'd feel quite at home. Why don't you take your courage in both hands and join me? It's just the place for a literary man—Byron, Ruskin, Browning, D'Annunzio, they all loved Venice. You could have a room to yourself and work till your eyes dropped out. No noise of traffic—just the soothing plash of the gondoliers' oars. I should keep everyone from you and only allow myself to see you at the rarest intervals. Some Marco or Tito would be posted at your door with his finger on his lips. When inspiration flagged you could come out and stroll on the Piazza or bathe on the Lido. I shall have a capanna there and a motor-boat to take us to and fro. Motor-boats hardly existed in my Venice, and I don't like the idea of them, but the Venetians are mad about them, I hear, and we must be in the fashion. Now don't say 'no' at once, as I see you were going to, but just think it over quietly, and I shall have a little talk with your sister. I'm sure she'll agree with me that it's the right thing for you—and even if it isn't, it's the right thing for me," she finished up.

"Oh!" breathed Eustace, and was silent. The room grew indistinct, and suddenly his mind was spanned by the arch of the Bridge of Sighs, with a palace and a prison on each hand—one of Byron's lapses from flawless syntax. "But would you want me there all that time?" he said, his mind jumping, as was its habit, to the temporal factor. Then he remembered that Lady Nelly had said nothing about how long she wanted him to stay, and blushed. But she made things easy for

him: it seemed to be her mission to make things easy for people.

"Don't imagine I shall try to keep you against your will," she said, with so completely the air of answering his question that for a moment he thought she had. "The door will always be open for the prisoner to walk out, or dive out"—and with a comical little gesture she sketched the beginning of a header. "But I hope you'll give the treatment a good trial first." For a moment she fell into abstraction, then her smile recalled her to herself. "I can see I have made you miserable," she said. "You look just as if you were being led to execution. Let's go and see what the fives-players are doing."

She piloted him down a long passage. At the bends stood wooden halberdiers on platforms, wild-eyed and moustachioed, with lanterns in their disengaged hands. The light fell on more prosaic objects—a stuffed pike in a glass case, a weather gauge, a miniature chest of drawers, labelled, perhaps for birds' eggs. Presently they heard the sharp thud of a ball rebounding from a padded, springy surface; the scurry of footsteps, and then a loud crash and a burst of laughter.

"This is the moment for us to go in," said Lady Nelly.

Eustace never forgot the scene. Dick was groping under a sofa for the ball; he straightened himself up as they came in. Both he and Antony had taken their coats off and pulled up their shirt-sleeves as far as they would go, which in Dick's case was not very far above his thick strong wrists. Anne looked quite another person, but the greatest change was in Hilda. Disarranged though it was, with much of the stiffness gone out of it, and crumpled here and there, her dress now seemed to belong to her. The essential Hilda was visible through all her alien finery and raised to a higher power than usual; she electrified the room. All the players turned bright excited eyes on Lady Nelly and Eustace, as though they were visitors from

another world, who could not immediately be got into focus.

"Brilliantly timed, Aunt Nelly," said Dick. "A moment sooner and you would have stopped a fast one. It got the door just where your head was. Why didn't you send in Eustace as a shield?"

As he spoke Lady Nelly's curious power of subduing an atmosphere to the pressure, which meant the relaxation, of her own began to penetrate the room. At its touch the players, feeling the hot fit of the game die down in them, also felt awkward and uncouth, as though they had been caught turning cart-wheels in the ante-chamber of Cleopatra. Strenuousness seemed improper in her presence. Slightly ashamed, they turned away and tried to regain their poise; even Hilda gave herself a pat or two; even Dick, following Antony's lead, pulled down his shirt-cuffs and looked round for his coat.

"Oh, what are you doing?" cried Lady Nelly, with an older person's dread of being thought a kill-joy. "Eustace and I came to see the game. Please strip and start again. I can't bear to see gladiators in evening dress."

"It was the end of the game," said Dick; "but to please Aunt Nelly we'll stage an exhibition match. Seconds out of the ring."

The four players took up their positions at the table, while Lady Nelly and Eustace watched from a raised sofa at the side.

Without appreciating the fine points of the game, Eustace was at once conscious of the different methods of the players. Anne was sure and steady: she got back everything she could, but did not tire herself by trying for impossibilities. Antony did not hit hard, but his reactions were so quick that nothing took him by surprise, and when he got his opponent out of position, his soft shot that hugged the cushion was deadly. Dick concentrated, it seemed to Eustace, on doing the thing that would most surprise his opponents,

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regardless of its being the best thing to do in the circumstances. His activity was amazing, his stride put a girdle round the table, and he hit so hard that the ball sometimes leapt the cushion and struck the panelling with a tremendous crash, at which Hilda's eyes gleamed. She made wild sweeps at the ball, sometimes missing it altogether. She played clumsily, but as if her life depended on it; she seemed unable to shorten her stride or get herself where she wanted; but she had a natural eye, and scored with several long shots into the pocket.

Eustace applauded furtively, but he couldn't catch her attention; between the rallies she didn't talk as the others did, but kept her eyes fixed on the table, and her hands ready for the next shot. They were red and bruised, but she didn't seem to notice and never flinched from a hard one. She had taken off her wrist-watch, Eustace was relieved to see.

The game went fairly evenly, with Anne and Antony always a little ahead. Then Dick and Hilda, with a tremendous output of energy, managed to draw level. To Dick, Eustace realized, all this display of animal spirits was part of the game, just as his exhortations to Hilda were, and his constant barracking of his opponents. He hated to let things take their course; he must turn the most humdrum happening into an occasion, with plumes and banners and sideshows. Bencath it all he remained cool and detached; but Hilda drank the excitement like wine, it possessed her completely.

"Game-ball all," was called, and the players went into conclave.

"Shall we play it out?" said Dick, "or shall we have sudden death? I vote for sudden death."

They agreed to sudden death, and when they went to their posts they all, Anne and Antony included, looked as if they were facing a crisis in their lives.

"Don't they look funny?" murmured Lady Nelly, but Eustace could not bring himself to say yes.

The rally was a long one and furiously contested.

At last a really noble recovery from Hilda struggled to the end of the table; Antony was there as though by magic and touched the ball against the cushion; Dick came down like a whirlwind to reach it before it stopped. On the way he charged the table, which shuddered through all its length. The impact undoubtedly prolonged for a split second the ball's run. Dick was on to it in a trice, and the crash as the ball struck the panelling drowned the room in noise; but it had stopped, Eustace was certain; it was dead before he reached it.

"How was that?" he demanded of the company.

"Antony and I think it was dead, Dick," said Anne firmly.

"You couldn't possibly see, Anne, from where you were. What do you think, Antony?"

"Well," said Antony, "I'm not unbiased, of course, but I thought it was dead."

"Let's appeal to the gallery." Dick's voice rang with confidence. "What's your verdict, Aunt Nelly?"

"I haven't one," said Lady Nelly. "I've been too busy admiring you all."

"Eustace?" said Dick, on a rising note of hopefulness, and as though the decision had already been given in his favour.

Eustace drew a long breath. How cruel to leave the casting-vote to him. He felt as though it would alter the whole course of history.

"Well," he said, "it was a very, very near thing, but I thought you were just too late."

Dick's brow darkened.

"Lookers-on see most of the game, eh?"

"I thought so, too," said Hilda suddenly.

Dick's face cleared as though by magic, and he was all bonhomie again.

"That settles it," he said. "You're all against me, even my partner, whom I trusted. Never mind, we had a good game, didn't we? Next time you'll have to take a hand, Eustace—won't he, Hilda?"

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"I'm afraid it's too energetic for him," said Hilda. Nervous, she spoke more emphatically than she meant to. "You see, he has a weak heart."

Eustace was relieved that nobody looked at him.

"Well, so long as it's in the right place," said Dick carelessly, dismissing Eustace's heart. But Lady Nelly turned to him and said:

"Venice is just the place for a tired heart. No hills, no billiard-fives, no excitements. Just a few bridges to cross between getting up and going to bed. To-morrow I shall talk it over with your sister," she said, rising from the sofa. "Thank you all for the thrilling entertainment. But look at your poor hands!"

"Shall we have a hand inspection?" said Dick, spreading his hands out on the billiard-table. "Put yours there, next mine, Hilda, and then yours, Anne, and yours, Antony."

Obediently they lined up and pressed their hands on the table as if for 'Up Jenkins,' while Lady Nelly leaned over their bent heads to make her report.

"Well, Antony's hands are black and yellow," she said judicially; "Anne's are black and blue, Miss Cherrington's hands I won't attempt to describe—my dear, why did you use such beautiful hands for such a purpose?—but there's nothing at all wrong with Dick's—they must be made of leather."

"Do you think Hilda's require immediate attention?" Dick asked as he put on his coat. "She'd better fall out and report sick in the housekeeper's room. I know where the surgical stores are kept."

"I shouldn't let him try, if I were you, Miss Cherrington," said Anne, "he's much better at killing than curing."

"Oh, really, Anne, and I've been a brother to you all these years," said Dick. "I should ask you to help if I didn't know you fainted at the sight of sticking-plaster."

Standing in the shadow of the doorway, Eustace managed to possess himself of one of Hilda's hands.

To his surprise, she did not snatch it away; she let it lie in his. But before he had time to look, another hand closed over Hilda's, and Dick said, in a serious voice, "Bad show, I'm afraid. Better let me see what I can do—don't you think so, Eustace?"

Lady Nelly answered for him.

"You've done quite enough already. If you come to my room, Miss Cherrington, I'll give you something of mine. It's guaranteed to heal anything, from a broken heart downwards."

"Or upwards," said Dick, with a gusty sigh. "Hands are more in my department than hearts, Aunt Nelly."

"The proper place for the hand is on the heart," said Aunt Nelly lightly. "Come along, Miss Cherrington."

They returned to the drawing-room, but it was empty, and the bridge players had gone to bed. There was a chorus of good-nights at the foot of the staircase.

"I'll turn the lights out, Antony," Eustace heard Dick say, as the others were drifting up. "And here's what I owe you on the evening." He took something from his pocket.

"Oh, that doesn't matter, Dick," said Antony.

"Yes, it does," said Dick, "I should have claimed it from you. Good-night, Antony; good-night, Eustace."

Antony and Eustace walked across the courtyard. The moon shone through a slight haze, the night was deliciously warm. The sense of privacy and relaxation that Eustace always enjoyed with Antony came like balm after the varied and tumultuous impressions of the evening.

"Did you and Dick have a bet on the game?" Eustace asked.

"Yes, he always likes a stake," said Antony. "He would have had something on if we'd been playing Postman's Knock."

As they reached their doorway, which reminded Eustace of the entrance to a college staircase, Antony

said, "I think I maligned Dick to you. He isn't so bad. He was really rather fun this evening."

"I was surprised that he called Hilda by her Christian name," said Eustace, turning on the light to go into his room. "When did he begin to do that?"

"He said he couldn't teach her the game unless he did," said Antony. "He made quite a thing about it. You don't mind, do you?"

Eustace thought a moment.

"No, not at all. I felt a little funny when he said it. I don't know why."

"He's not a bad sort of chap," said Antony. "Of course, he doesn't want one to know what he's really like. All that patter is a kind of smoke-screen. I think he was really sorry about your sister's hands."

"He seemed to be," said Eustace. "I didn't see them properly."

He remembered that his good-night to Hilda had been a mere conventional salute. All the evening he had been trying to get a special message through to her, and always, it seemed, she had been looking the other way.

"I should hate it if she was really hurt," he said anxiously. "I was responsible for her coming here in a way. It would be awful if she had really injured herself and couldn't go back to work."

"Oh, I shouldn't bother," Antony stifled a yawn and smiled in apology. "Lady Nelly would look after her. She is an angel, isn't she? How did you find her after dinner?"

"Quite irresistible." Eustace felt this was the right thing to say. "I'll tell you all about it to-morrow."

When Antony had gone, the thought of the invitation to Venice flooded Eustace with happiness. So overpowering was the sensation that he could hardly get undressed. Each garment as he shed it seemed to bring him nearer to his goal. But when he got into bed doubts began to rise. What would they say? What would Aunt Sarah say to a proposal that had so little

the appearance of taking life seriously? And what would Hilda say—Hilda, who didn't like to let a day pass without some effort that taxed her to the utmost? While he was lounging in a gondola, she would be bearding a Board of Directors.

'But how did you come to injure your hands, Miss Cherrington?'

'Oh, I did that at Anchorstone Hall. It was just a game, rather a rough game, too rough for my brother Eustace, so I played instead of him.'

'But didn't he attend to your hands afterwards?'

'Oh no, he left that to Lady Nelly Staveley—a society woman. She did her best, of course, but it wasn't the way a professional would have done it.'

'We sincerely hope you'll recover the use of, at any rate, one of your hands, Miss Cherrington—otherwisc, of course, we shall be obliged——'

'Oh, I'm sure I shall, if you give me time.'

Perhaps Hilda was still with Lady Nelly; perhaps Lady Nelly had gone down to the housekeeper's room to find some lint. The passages would be in darkness; how would she find the way? The clock struck one. Hilda'll be in her own room now, thought Eustace; I ought to go to her; I can soon put my clothes on, or just wear my dressing-gown. But I should look very funny if they caught me wandering about so late, striking matches and dropping the heads everywhere.

There were so many doors in the corridor, that was the trouble, and he had no idea which was Hilda's. Ah, she would have left her shoes outside the door, her blue shoes; he would know them because he had helped her to choose them. But none of the doors had shoes outside, for this was a private house, and to put one's shoes outside the door would be a social solecism. Still, he mustn't give up the quest; he couldn't rest till he had seen Hilda's hands; he must try every door.

But what would they say, what would Lady Staveley say, for instance, if he came creeping into her room? She would think he was mad, and scream, and raise the house, and perhaps he would spend the rest of the night in a dungeon, before being taken away the next morning under a guard. Never mind, he must find Hilda and ask if she was in great pain and tell her how sorry he was.

But surely these were Hilda's shoes? She didn't know the rule about not putting shoes outside your door. He would have to tell her some time. But perhaps no one had seen them except the servants, who would laugh a little, but not think seriously the worse of her.

The handle turned easily and noiselessly, and he went in.

But could this be Hilda's room when Dick was sitting on the bed clad only in his pyjama trousers?

He rose from the bed and moved slowly towards Eustace, his eyes glittering in the moonlight.

'I was expecting you,' he said. 'I knew you'd come sneaking in.'

'I'm looking for Hilda,' said Eustace wildly. 'Haven't you made a mistake? Isn't this her room?'

'It's you who've made the mistake,' said Dick, coming nearer. . . .

Eustace woke with a start. There was a thin strip of sunlight on the wall and the birds were singing. Greatly relieved, he fell asleep again.

CHAPTER IX

HILDA'S HANDS

At the stroke of nine Sir John Staveley laid his cap and stick on their accustomed chair in the Banqueting Hall. The room was empty, but a glance at the table showed him that someone had already breakfasted. He went to the great window and looked across the wide lawn. The heads of the rhododendrons and azaleas, white, crimson and orange, still looked heavy with sleep. Unconsciously making allowance for the ever-optimistic forecast of the amber-tinted glass, he knew that none the less this was going to be an exceptionally fine day.

Turning back, he went down the steps into the body of the hall. Heaping his plate with bacon and eggs, he returned to the dais and sat down. At that moment his wife came in.

"Good-morning, my dear." He rose and kissed her. "Is this too substantial for you?"—he waved to the eggs and bacon.

"Yes, I think it is," said Lady Staveley. "I'll get something myself, if you don't mind."

"Quite a good game of bridge we had," he remarked when she came back. "But it was a pity you didn't return my heart lead."

"I couldn't know you had the Queen," said Lady Staveley defensively.

"You must have known I had something, or I shouldn't have declared an original No Trump."

An expression of uneasy vagueness crossed Lady Staveley's face. "I expect I was thinking about something else," she said.

"Well, you shouldn't have been. Bridge isn't like a game. Monica wasn't up to her usual form, either. Pity Dick doesn't really care for bridge."

Lady Staveley looked at the tell-tale crumbs.

"Has he been down already?"

"Somebody has—might have been anyone," said Sir John, "when you fill the house with strangers."

"You seemed to enjoy talking to Miss Cherrington at dinner last night," said Lady Staveley.

Sir John sat up and took hold of the lapels of his coat, which was a Sunday version of his country wear, and hardly distinguishable from it.

"Striking-looking young woman, isn't she? A bit shy to begin with, but she talked away all right about that hospital of hers. I nearly promised her a subscription."

"Did she ask you for one?"

"Oh Lord, no; but it's clear she's going all out to make the thing a success. Doesn't seem to care much about anything else—rather remarkable in a young girl, don't you think?"

"She's not so very young," said Lady Staveley. "Her brother told me she was nearly four years older than he is."

"What did you make of him?" Sir John's nose wrinkled. "Bit namby-pamby, what?"

"He's very easy to talk to," Lady Staveley said. "We had quite a good gossip about books. He's a little too eager to please for my taste. He seemed anxious about his sister—he kept looking across to see how she was getting on."

"I don't blame him," said Sir John. "Good-looking girl like that." He checked his laugh midway, and they were both silent for a moment. "I wonder what the others did with themselves after dinner," he went on; and then, as the door opened, "Ah, here's Anne, she can tell us."

"What can I tell you?" inquired Anne, when she had greeted her parents.

"How you all occupied yourselves while we were playing bridge."

"Well," said Anne, from the chafing-dish, "I can't

tell you what Aunt Nelly and Mr. Cherrington did, because we left them sitting on the sofa."

"I expect they had a heart-to-heart talk," said Lady Staveley. "And what did you do?"

"Need you ask?" said Anne. "Dick made us play billiard-fives. Look at my hands."

She held them up.

"Poor darling!"

"I don't expect you were hitting the ball the right way," said Sir John robustly. "If you hit with your hand flat, of course you'll hurt yourself."

"I don't hit with my hand flat, Papa."

"It's a barbarous game, anyway, and ruinous to the table," said Sir John. "Not that anyone plays billiards nowadays—too slow for 'em, I suppose. Who won?"

"Antony and I, by a very short head," said Anne. "Dick tried to cheat us of our victory, but he didn't succeed."

"I wish you wouldn't say those things about Dick," said his mother.

"It was only in fun."

"I know, but strangers mightn't understand."

"You mean, they might understand."

"Now, now," said Sir John. "But how did Miss Cherrington shape?"

"I take it she played with Dick?" put in Lady Staveley.

"Well, my dear, who else could she have played with?"

"She played most valiantly," said Anne. "I won't say she played gracefully, or with style, or that Papa would have approved of the way she hit the ball. But she played as hard as she could all the time."

"I thought she would." Sir John looked pleased. "But didn't Dick show her how to hold her hand?" he asked indignantly.

"Yes, he did, Papa, more than once; but strange as it may seem to you, it isn't always easy to remember

the first time you play. She knocked her hands about a good deal, I'm afraid, but she didn't complain."

"She's used to rough work, I expect," said Lady Staveley.

"Poor girl, I hope you gave her some stuff to put on her hands. Powdered alum's the best. She ought to practise a bit this morning, gently I mean, just to harden them up and take the stiffness off."

"I'm sure she won't want to do anything of the kind, Papa. You really have the most surprising ideas of what people will want to do. I doubt if she'll ever look at a billiard-table again."

Lady Staveley's face brightened a little.

"You don't think she really enjoyed it?"

"I wouldn't say that," said Anne. "In fact, I think she enjoyed it more than any of us. But I don't imagine she wants to do it all the time."

"Monica could take her place this evening—that is, if Miss Cherrington plays bridge," said Sir John thoughtfully. "Where is Monica, by the way? She always comes down so early."

"She's got a bit of a headache and is having breakfast in bed."

"Monica? A headache?"

"Well, Papa, we all have headaches sometimes."

"She didn't have one last night."

"How do you know? She may have been suffering agonies. I expect you were too busy playing bridge to notice."

"I thought she looked a little tired," Lady Staveley said.

"I never heard of Monica being tired," said Sir John with an aggrieved air. "Perhaps Cherrington plays bridge? Though he doesn't look as if he would. . . . And, of course, Antony doesn't. He would have to stop talking."

"We'll arrange a rubber for you somehow, won't we, Mama?" said Anne soothingly.

"Meanwhile, we've got to get through the day," Sir

John said, unappeased. "I suppose the Cherringtons will go to church? Or are they heathens?"

"Mr. Cherrington said he would like to walk along the sands to see the places where he and his sister used to play when they were children. He was so funny about it, he seemed to think it might be against the rules," said Anne, smiling at the remembrance.

"Odd thing to want to do," said Sir John.

Lady Staveley looked up.

"No, my dear, very natural. And, of course, he'd want his sister to go with him. They could do that in the afternoon. Perhaps they'd like to renew their recollections of the town and have tea there—we could send the car in to fetch them."

Sir John's eyes looked very blue under his sandy, wiry eyebrows.

"Mustn't seem as if we wanted to get rid of 'em. Besides, we don't know what plans Dick may have."

"No, we don't," said Lady Staveley thoughtfully.

"Dick said something about asking them to stay till Tuesday," Anne remarked.

"What, the whole boiling?" cried Sir John, aghast.

"No, Mr. Cherrington and his sister."

"What on earth should we do with them?"

"People don't always want things done to them, Papa."

"We can ask them, of course, if Dick wishes it," said Lady Staveley. "But I imagine that Miss Cherrington will have to return to her duties."

"Pity for a pretty girl like that to be a hospital nurse," said Sir John.

"Oh, they're often pretty," said Lady Staveley. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed that."

"She isn't a hospital nurse," said Anne. "She's secretary to a Children's Clinic. There's a lot of difference."

"I believe Anne likes the girl," said Sir John.

"I don't understand her," said Anne. "She's like no one I've ever met—I don't mean in the social sense—

in any sense. But I own I am intrigued by her. I don't think she cares much about people, though."

"What makes you think that?" Lady Staveley asked. "She's rather farouche, of course, and a little, well, ungracious sometimes in her manner."

"That's partly shyness, Mama, and she may not approve of the way we live. But I don't think she realizes people much—I don't think she knows what's going on round her."

"Well, what is going on round her?" demanded Sir John, his eyebrows betraying some impatience with Anne's efforts to analyse Hilda's character.

"Nothing, we hope, except the usual dull routine of an Anchorstone Saturday to Monday," said Lady Staveley. "Ah, here's Victor."

Partly in order not to be late, partly in order to see Anchorstone Hall in the morning freshness that was breathing through his window, partly in the hope of stealing a march on the others, for he shrank from the thought of a crowded breakfast-table, Eustace hurried over his dressing. But his main object was to see Hilda and find out about the state of her hands before she got barricaded from him by the rest of the party. He was so used to talking to her alone that in the presence of other people he found nothing to say to her, and became painfully shy.

Outside in the quadrangle, under the blue clock which said twenty to nine, Eustace considered what would be the best moment to run the gauntlet of ladies returning from their baths and ladies' maids (of whom he envisaged a great number) discreetly hurrying to and fro—at some point in which Hilda was. A cook in a white hat emerged from a door on the left of the Banqueting Hall, looked round, and retreated. Eustace sighed. There was so much to absorb, to get used to. Perhaps it would be best to eat first and act afterwards. He went towards the Banqueting Hall. Perhaps he would find Hilda there.

But she wasn't. He had the sunny room to himself, and came out no nearer to the solution of his problem. Five minutes to nine seemed a particularly unpromising moment to go in search of Hilda—the very moment at which all bedroom doors would be flying open to discharge their occupants.

'Good-morning, Mr. Cherrington. Can I help you, you look rather lost.'

'Oh, I was just looking for my sister Hilda, she's somewhere along here, you know.'

'Well, don't go in there, that's Lady Staveley's bathroom.'

'What about this one?'

'That's my room, if you don't mind.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry, I'll try a little farther along. It is rather confusing, isn't it, all these doors?'

'I suppose it must be, the first time you come. . . . No, that's no good, that's a W.C.'

Eustace's imaginary interlocutor began to laugh, not very pleasantly.

'Oh dear, what a lot of mistakes I make.'

'Yes, you haven't been very lucky so far, have you? Try the passage on the right.'

If only Antony had been awake when he came down! But he was asleep in a great tornado of bed-clothes, beside his untasted tea, and Eustace hadn't the heart to wake him.

The agitation of his thoughts had taken his steps through the gate in the railing and into the garden. He turned to the right, away from the Banqueting Hall. This was the new part, despised by Antony. What rows of windows! Hilda must be behind one of them. If only he could transfer a thought to her, a hint that she should hang a towel out, as had once been done at Glamis Castle. But that wouldn't make it much easier, inside, to find which room the towel belonged to. Eustace wondered if Anchorstone Hall

was haunted, and if so, by what sort of ghost. Dick would certainly say it was, and invent a ghost on the spur of the moment. One couldn't associate him with a ghost, he was too corporeal. Ghostly and bodily. Perhaps more easily with a devil?

Eustace followed the path to the right under some chestnuts. The path was not much used: it was earthy and dank; this was not the show side of the house, perhaps the chestnuts had been planted to hide it. Here the screen stopped; here the new part ended in a plain Georgian front which was perhaps the library. It was a relief, after the self-conscious Elizabethanism of the Victorian wing. Now came a bridge over the stream that fed the moat. The rivulet wandered away rather charmingly through banks of azaleas, as though it had finished its military service and returned to civil life.

A tubby boat of nondescript build, with the paint peeling off, was moored to the bank. Inside lay a paddle, and Eustace was tempted to embark and drift downstream on the bright, shallow water through the azaleas, until he came out into the open sea. A line from Emily Brontë slid into his mind: 'Eternally, entirely free.' How soothing to be borne away, with no volition of his own, past gardens with trim lawns and brick embankments, past backyards with washing hanging from the line, through cornfields and allotments, under elders and alders—a landscape that alternated perpetually between the inhabited and the uninhabited, the desert and the sown. Now the stream is going faster; ahead, look, it divides—what is that noise, that deep, grinding noise? It must be a mill, a water-mill, and he hadn't seen the danger in time; he was heading straight for the grim stone building, stretched across the stream, blank and windowless above, but below pierced with black, roundheaded holes where the mill-wheels turned. The boat would not answer to the paddle; it swung sideways and hastened to its doom. And suddenly Hilda was with

him in the boat: they were together, like Tom and Maggie Tulliver in the 'Mill on the Floss.'

Eustace looked again at the boat and laughed to think of the melodramatic end he had imagined for his voyage. The little craft renewed its invitation: he stepped down the bank and found that it was chained to a stake, and padlocked. Never mind, he would ask Dick for the key.

Crossing a bridge, he found himself in line with the front of the house, the famous front that was illustrated in railway carriages and books on house architecture. He walked out into the park to have a good view.

It was early Jacobean, he supposed, and rather like the front of a college, with the tower over the gateway and the wings flanking it. Flints were embedded in the grey stone, dark, sparkling points in the ashen-coloured wall. No trouble here to identify his bedroom: his window was on the left of the oriel window, which was Antony's. Mentally he marked it with a cross. Yes, Stephen, that is my window, the window of the room I sleep in when I'm staying at Anchorstone Hall. How patiently the centuries had waited for his coming! They were still alive, imprisoned in that proud building. Uplifted, he stared at the mass of time-resisting masonry; and the outline of the space of which it robbed the sky was becoming printed on his mind when he was gradually aware of another shadow in the background. Around, above, beyond the silhouette of Anchorstone Hall, dwarfing that nice little place, towered the tremendous walls of Whaplode.

Eustace crossed the bridge over the moat and received a salute from the janitor in his top-hat. Returning the salute, he followed the path under the windows. They came down low enough for him to see in. There, on an indoor ledge, were the helmets Antony had spoken of: three of them, one lying on its side; they looked forgotten and at once romantic and

slightly ridiculous, with their air of dusty defiance, of issuing a challenge which had expired centuries ago, and which no one, not even a housemaid, took up.

Eustace turned the corner, leaving the stream, no longer canalized for defence, to throw a wide, shining crescent of water, almost a lake, between the garden and the park. Grey stone gave place to red; the path dipped; he was below the windows of the Banqueting Hall, too far below, he was glad to think, to be visible to the breakfasters. Towards the end of the wide lawn a wooden bridge with spokes, half Chippendale, half Chinese, led to an opening which must be the flower-garden, for through the gap came a burst of brightness and flashes of white and red. Declining its invitation, Eustace went straight on and suddenly found himself standing on the edge of a little ruin. From the uncut grass, now nearly grown to hay, rose here a pillar, there a fragment of wall. Much was upright, but more was lying flat; some of the stones were quite embedded in the grass, which flowed round and over them like water. That long stone with a cross on it might have been a coffin lid; the broken octagon, with a criss-cross moulding much weathered, standing on a pedestal, must have been a font. On one side the ruins were bounded by the wall of the Banqueting Hall; clinging to its pinkish face were fragments of tracery, bosses, corbels, capitals; some had caught the rain and were crusted with moss; here a door seemed to have been filled in, there a window. Eustace tried to see the logical connexion of these remnants, and make a mental reconstruction of the wall as it must once have looked; but the clues were all at different levels; the door was half-way up the wall, the window disappeared into the ground: nothing fitted. Perhaps there had been a crypt.

"Taking a look round?" said a voice behind him.

Eustace turned with a start. Dick Staveley was standing there; he was leaning on the font, with his arms crossed.

"I'm afraid I was," said Eustace, always apt to apologize for any activity, however blameless. "I was trying to see how all that tracery fitted in. This was a chapel, I suppose?"

"You're right; lots of little Staveleys have been baptized in this font," Dick said. "But at the time of the Reformation the Staveley of the day became such an ardent Protestant that he pulled the chapel down and used the stones for building purposes."

"What a vandal!" Eustace hoped this was not too strong a word to use of Dick's ancestor.

"Yes, and it's said he had the site deconsecrated; do you smell a religious spring-cleaning?"

"I can't say I do," said Eustace. "It seems a charming place, and full of atmosphere. I should come here often, if it belonged to me."

"I like it too," said Dick unexpectedly, "better than a church with a roof. . . . Are you going to church, by the way? There's no compulsion."

"I thought I would," Eustace said; "but first I wanted to get hold of Hilda and ask her how her hands are, only I didn't know which was her bedroom."

"I could have told you," said Dick. "But in any case, you would have found her name on the door."

"Of course!" cried Eustace. "What a fool I am."

Realizing that if he had used his common sense he would have spared himself a great deal of worry, he was overcome with vexation and self-reproach.

"I don't suppose you've seen her?" he said.

Dick straightened himself slightly on the font.

"Not this morning. I must ask her about her hands too. Is she a church-goer?"

Eustace thought a moment.

"No, she doesn't go to church much. She's not religious in the conventional sense."

"I thought she might be," said Dick from across the font.

Since the last evening Eustace had pictured him

as always in violent motion, and was surprised that he could stand so still.

"She has very strong principles, though, and high standards," said Eustace, astonished to find himself talking so intimately to Dick. "But they're more to do with working hard, and doing good in the world—you know what I mean."

"Yes, I think I get you," said Dick.

"She judges people by the work they get done," Eustace went on.

"Not by the way they conduct their private lives?"

"No," said Eustace. "I don't think she thinks much about that."

"But I suppose she has a private life of her own?"

Eustace hesitated.

"With us, of course, in the family, she has. Outside the family, she doesn't seem to take much interest in people except as they affect her work at the clinic." He paused. Talking of Hilda, he heard himself using a special voice, deeper than his own, pompous almost. He could not speak of her lightly, try as he would. "Purely personal relationships would seem a form of self-indulgence to her, I fancy," he went on. "Of course, I don't know."

"You mean, she wouldn't take them very seriously?" said Dick; and before Eustace could answer, he added, "Doesn't she interest herself in yours?"

Eustace coloured. His life suddenly seemed bare of interesting personal relationships. But he did not want Dick to think so.

"Oh no," he said airily. "She leaves me to go my own way."

How untrue that was; and yet in the sense Dick meant, it was true.

"And you leave her to go hers? You don't feel you ought to play the heavy father to her?"

Eustace laughed.

"It wouldn't be any good me trying. You see, she's a good deal older than I am. Even my father, when he

was alive, never exercised much parental control over her, and Mother died while she was a child."

"So you're all alone in the world—orphans of the storm?"

"Except for my younger sister, who's married now, and my aunt, who makes a home for us. We have no other near relations."

"I see," said Dick. "No one to mind what you do." He leaned over the font and, taking hold of a bit of masonry that stuck out, tooth-like, from the gash in its side, wrenched the fragment off.

To Eustace it was as if the stone cried out, and he could not hide the pain he felt.

"Don't distress yourself," said Dick, smiling, "it would have had to come off, anyhow. I'm just forestalling wind and weather." He threw the fragment playfully at Eustace, who caught and put it in his pocket.

"Is your sister as fond of old places as you are?"

Eustace wondered what answer Dick would want him to make.

"I don't think she is," he said. "Of course, she might learn to be. But she thinks things ought to be shaken up. She likes change and distrusts the status quo; she looks forward not back."

"She doesn't let the past worry her?"

"Oh no," said Eustace. "She puts it clean out of her mind."

"She cuts her losses, in fact. Very sensible of her. Tell me," Dick went on, "at this clinic of hers does she give parties and beanos and so on? Excuse me asking you all these questions, but I always like to know how my friends live. I'm full of curiosity, I'm afraid."

"Oh yes," said Eustace. "She arranges entertainments for the children, Christmas trees and conjurers, and picnics in the summer."

"But nothing more—more adult? No dances for the staff, or cocktail parties for the parents, or midnight follies for the doctors?"

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Eustace laughed.

"If she does, she hasn't told me. She's not fond of dancing, and she doesn't care for entertainments as such. They're like a bazaar to her, or a flag-day; she works hard to make them a success, and then they're over till the next one comes."

"A clean slate again."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Eustace took a glance at the portrait of Hilda which, with Dick guiding the pencil, seemed to be growing under his hand. It was not quite the Hilda he knew, this self-reliant young woman who was always cutting her losses and wiping the slate clean; but it had many of her characteristics. Above all, it seemed to please Dick, and Eustace was always pleased to please.

"Why should we stand?" said Dick suddenly. "Let's sit down. You look a bit tired. Feeling all right?"

All at once Eustace was conscious of feeling tired, and at the same time he was touched that Dick had noticed it. Picking their way through the long grass and the débris, they came to the remains of a sedilia and sat down. It was an austere kind of seat.

"Damned uncomfortable these old monks must have been," Dick said. "Still, we shall be able to bear it for a minute or two. You're not in a hurry to go?"

"No," said Eustace. "I should like just to have a word with Hilda before we go to church."

"Oh, you'll have plenty of time for that. . . . Smoke?"

Eustace took a cigarette from Dick's gold cigarette-case.

"Must be a long time ago we met you and your sister on the sands," Dick said.

"Fourteen or fifteen years," said Eustace.

"As much as that? Funny I should remember it so clearly."

"I do too," said Eustace. "I could find the exact place. In fact, I was going to ask you if you'd mind if

Hilda and I walked there this afternoon, just to see what it was like."

Dick seemed amused at this request.

"Of course. We could all go, if you like, and take our shrimping nets. I dare say we could find some. Unless"—Dick paused—"unless they happen to have made some other plan."

"Oh, in that case——" cried Eustace.

"Well, we'll see. Do you remember Nancy Steptoe, the girl who was with us that day?"

"Yes indeed," said Eustace. "I've often wondered what happened to her."

"She married a smart-looking chap called Alberic," said Dick; "but he turned out no good. I don't know whether they're still together. Better not to marry, don't you think?"

Memories of Barbara's rather hugger-mugger but happy-seeming nuptials drifted into Eustace's mind.

"Oh, I don't know," he said.

Dick pulled up a piece of grass and sucked it.

"I notice you haven't taken the plunge," he said.

"I'm not in a position to," Eustace answered, "yet."

"I guarantee," said Dick, "you'll have more fun sunning yourself on the Lido with Aunt Nelly than you would setting up a house and paying people to push perambulators."

"Oh, did Lady Nelly tell you about that?" said Eustace.

"Yes, you made quite a hit with her, you know. Charming woman—but I'm sure she's been a lot happier since my lamented uncle died. He was a millstone round her neck. Never let yourself get tied up, that's my motto. It seems to be the motto of a good many people in this house."

Just as he spoke Sir John and Lady Staveley came through the iron gate and passed close by without noticing them. Though they were walking in the opposite direction, they had the dedicated and purposeful air of people going to church.

"There, you sec," Eustace ventured to say.

"Well, yes. My father always likes to be ten minutes early for church, so Mama has to be too, to oblige him. It all ends in that."

"What does?" asked Eustace.

"Marriage. Unless it first goes on the rocks."

"Well," said Eustace vaguely, "I suppose there has to be a certain amount of give and take."

As soon as he had uttered this remark he was ashamed of its triteness. At Oxford his friends might have quoted it against him. 'Eustace says there has to be a certain amount of give and take in marriage.' He would have had to live it down. But Dick did not appear to be conversationally fastidious, for he only said, "That sort of bargaining doesn't appeal to me. Hullo," he added, "the bells have begun. Did you think of going to church? There's no compulsion, mind."

The sound of the peal filled the air with an irresistible sense of Sunday, which Dick's tweed suit had somehow banished from Eustace's mind. He had meant to go, but he felt something was hanging on the conversation and did not want to break it off.

"Were you going?" he temporized.

"I might, for a consideration."

"What would that be?" asked Eustace.

Getting no answer, Eustace turned his head and saw that Dick, forgetful of his presence, was staring across the lawn to where, through the gap in the hedge, the gay, seductive colours of the garden gleamed. Over the grass the light, irregular interplay of voices reached them, mingling with the rhythmic sinking and swelling of the bells. But the speakers were invisible.

"Sounds like the girls," said Dick. "Ah, there they are."

As they came through the gap in their bright flowery dresses they seemed to bring the freshness of the garden with them. On the chinoiserie bridge they stopped and looked down into the water.

Leaning this way and that, their slender arms continuing the pattern of the delicate spokes below, they made a charming picture.

"They look like dryads," exclaimed Eustace.

"I wouldn't call Monica a dryad," said Dick, not taking his eyes off the little group, "or Anne, either, bless her. Your sister, yes."

"Oh, do you think so?" cried Eustace. "That reminds me, I must go and ask her about her hands, and tell her about this afternoon."

He started up, but Dick said, "Wait a moment. Don't let them see we've seen them."

The trio drifted across the lawn, Hilda in the middle. Eustace was pleased to see that her dress, though again somehow more emphatic than theirs, obviously had the same intention, even if more loudly proclaimed, and she kept in step with them, although the spring of her stride seemed cramped by strolling. Their faces looked friendly, almost respectful, as they turned towards her, while hers had the air it so often wore with strangers, of explaining something. If their conversation had not gone beyond the question and answer stage, at any rate they were not silent.

When they were hidden from view behind the angle of the Banqueting Hall Eustace got up again and said, "I think I'll run after Hilda now. I shall just catch her before she goes to church."

Dick had not taken his eyes off the place where the dryads were last seen.

"I shouldn't interrupt their girlish confidences," he said, looking up at Eustace and not offering to move. "They're getting to know each other, and young women don't find that easy. Won't your message wait till after church?"

"I suppose it will," said Eustace uneasily.

"Then sit down again and tell me some more."

Feeling he had betrayed a trust, Eustace obediently re-seated himself on the pinkish stone.

"What shall I tell you?"

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"Tell me about the first man who was in love with your sister."

The question staggered Eustace. It seemed unfair, against the rules, below the belt, the kind of question no gentleman would ask. In the passing of thirty seconds he discarded as many answers.

"In love with her?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"I couldn't tell you," said Eustace slowly, trying to keep resentment out of his voice.

"You couldn't? You must be very unobservant. Well, the first man who kissed her, then."

Amid the confusion of his thoughts, Eustace suddenly realized that the bells had stopped ringing, all except one, which went on monotonously repeating its summons until his brain seemed to throb beneath the strokes.

"I don't think any man has, except me," he said.

"Oh, come," said Dick, polite but incredulous. He rose unhurriedly from the stone, brushed himself cursorily, and fixing on Eustace, whose expression had got quite out of control, a look of sceptical amusement, he added, "you can tell me as we go."

The hammer strokes were ringing in Eustace's head.

"I've left something in my room," he muttered. "You go on. I'll catch you up."

"As you like," said Dick, almost indifferently, "you know where the church is," and they parted.

'Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord, for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.'

Making as little noise as he could, Eustace shut the iron-studded door and sat down breathless in the nearest pew. The unpunctuality that he deplored and dreaded had again overtaken him. The very principle of lateness moved faster than he did: it always caught him up. Why had he felt obliged to go to his room, just because he had told Dick he was going? To make his excuse seem genuine, he supposed. A childish piece

of self-deception, for Dick knew as well as he did that he had nothing to go for. Yet his conscience, or whatever did duty for it, had demanded that he should climb right up to his room and, after searching his mind for something to remember, decide on another half-crown for the collection. Well, now he had brought it he would have to give it, and that would be a lesson to him. Eustace felt abased.

'Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord.'

The party from Anchorstone Hall were sitting in the choir, on both sides of it apparently; through the painted screen, mutilated but lovely, he could see Sir John and Lady Staveley and Anne, and Dick at the end; the others must be facing them. He could not see Hilda, and not seeing her he was more than ever cut off from communion with her thoughts. She was not religious, at least she received no support from religion; if anything, she lent religion her support. She was so self-sufficient, so used to doing things for other people, that even religion could do nothing for her. Was that spiritual pride? Even to offer a prayer for her seemed an impertinence, or at any rate an irrelevance, just as it would be to offer a prayer for a saint. In childhood Eustace had always prayed for her, and he found himself wanting to now; but to pray for her was an admission of her fallibility, and Eustace's conception of her as infallible confused his thoughts. And for what benefit should he intercede?

He looked round him. There were about fifty people in a church that would easily have held five hundred. They would know he was a stranger, of course, but they would not know he was a guest at the Hall, because he was not sitting in the seats of the mighty, but in the body of the church with fishermen, farm-labourers and such—or with their wives, for only a few men were present. These looked so conscious of their collars that you could tell they wore them but once a week. Eustace felt like a first-class

passenger whom circumstances had obliged to travel third.

Perhaps his host and hostess would be annoyed, and imagine that by segregating himself he was advertising socialist opinions. He might have broken an important convention by not sitting with them. He would come out carrying some invisible but perceptible stigma of proletarianism. Moreover, he would miss seeing the back of the choir screen which was the glory of Anchorstone church. All things considered, he had better have kept away. No doubt he wouldn't have come if he hadn't hoped to make a good impression on the Staveleys, and be gaped at by yokels as he sat in a feudal and privileged position on the horns of the altar.

'Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord.'

He had been half angry, or at any rate surprised, when Dick asked him that question about Hilda. What question? No matter. Better not think about it here. But why not? What more natural for a man like Dick to ask a question like that? Stephen too had asked him a lot of questions, but not that one. At Oxford Eustace lived in a specialized society that didn't ask such questions. But they asked others which would have seemed just as surprising, no doubt, to Dick, and probably in more doubtful taste. In the war, in the Ministry of Labour, in the wide world, which included his tightly collared fellow-worshippers in this very church, that question (no matter what it was!) was often asked—not perhaps about his, but about other men's sisters. How childish to take fright or umbrage, as if no one had ever been—well—kissed, as if Barbara and her Jimmy had never got married! Would he have minded if Dick or anyone else had asked him who was the first man to kiss Barbara? No, he would have laughed, and felt rather pleased and proud of Barbara's many conquests. A kind of crust had formed round his relationship with Hilda, impervious to air

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and sunlight, banishing humour, making for stiffness. What right had he to fasten on Hilda feelings which he only imagined for her? He ought to be grateful to Dick, not annoyed with him. A shrine was one thing, but a shrine was for the dead not the living.

I must see Miss Fothergill's grave, he thought, as soon as the service is over. There'll just be time, while they are coming out, and then I can catch Hilda up, and find out about her hands, and ask her how she's getting on, and where her room is, and say anything else that occurs to me.

'Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord.'

With the conviction of his own unworthiness Eustace's resentment against Dick passed.

Self-abasement brought peace of mind. Ceasing to criticize others, he ceased to feel at odds with himself, and began to listen to the service, which by now was half-way through.

But he miscalculated the time it would take the manorial party to get out of church. Standing by the marble tombstone with 'Sacred to the memory of Janet Fothergill' in lettering as black and fresh as if it had been engraved yesterday, he could see them walking down the path that led to the park gateway—Dick and Hilda in front. They must have come through a door in the transept. He tried to fix his thoughts on Miss Fothergill, but the glistening black and staring white of her headstone recalled nothing of the faded reds and purples that she loved, just as the sunshine had nothing to do with the half-light that even on the brightest day bedimmed the drawing-room at Laburnum Lodge. Turning away, he hurried after the others. For a moment, however, the pond in front of the church detained him. Tree-shadowed and duck-haunted, it brought a pang of authentic recollection, almost the first his visit had vouchsafed him. So strongly did he feel his childhood pressing round him,

usurping his present self, that the Tudor gateway seemed a barrier against his entry, defending the privacy of the park against him, the public. As on Highcross Hill, though with a far, far feebler utterance, something warned him to turn back, making his steps difficult and slow, so that he slunk through like a trespasser.

Deserted, the courtyard sweltered in the sunshine, and somehow seemed the hotter for being empty. Eustace stood in doubt, watching the spirals of heat as they flickered up from the baking cobbles. Suddenly he heard a shout, coming apparently from nowhere, and a moment later Antony was there, outstripping, as so often, all the visible signs of his approach.

"Oh, Eustace, I've been looking for you. We saw you in the churchyard, but you were staring so sadly at a tombstone that we didn't like to disturb you. What are you doing now?"

"I was just wondering where Hilda is," said Eustace.

"Oh, I can tell you. Dick's taking her round the house. The others have all seen it," he added.

"I should rather like to see it," said Eustace. "But perhaps——" He left the sentence unfinished. "We shouldn't know where to find them, should we?"

Antony thought a moment. "They might be anywhere. I know, I'll take you. There's not much to look at, really. The library's rather nice, but wasted on them, for they never open a book, except Cousin Edie. You don't want to explore the Victorian dormitory, do you? All the rooms are named after departed kings and queens who couldn't possibly have slept in them, unless their ghosts were fireproof. It's really rather awful, beds made out of battlements, you know, and water colours of the house done by maiden Staveleys in the 'sixties—and in their sixties."

"Sh!" said Eustace, for all the windows seemed to

be bending outwards to drink in the sound of Antony's voice. "I'd rather like to see the bedrooms."

"Believe me, you wouldn't," said Antony firmly. "Let's go to the dungeons first, and if Dick has locked your sister up we shall be able to rescue her."

They did not, in fact, come across Dick and Hilda in the course of their tour. But just before luncheon, as Eustace was patrolling the courtyard in order not to be late, Fate lifted its ban and presented him with Hilda. The thing seemed so easy when it happened, that he could not believe he had spent the whole morning trying to bring it about. He realized how exaggerated was his relief in seeing her when she, on seeing him, betrayed no emotion beyond a look of wonder.

"Oh, Hilda!" he cried. "I couldn't find you; you were always being spirited away from me. How are your poor hands?"

"My hands?" echoed Hilda. "My hands? Oh, I see what you mean. My hands. Yes, they're quite all right." She held them out to him, first with the knuckles upwards, then the palms. One nail was a little torn, and a few bruises still showed yellowish under the healthy skin.

"Why, were you worrying about my hands?"

"I was, a little," Eustace unwillingly confessed, for he knew how much any kind of anxiety on her account irritated Hilda.

"My hands are quite all right," said Hilda again.

"And you're all right?" persisted Eustace, hoping there could be no occasion for offence in an inquiry couched in such general terms.

"Yes, I'm quite all right," repeated Hilda.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"Do I look as if I wasn't?"

If she did, it was wiser not to say so. "Not bored?"

"Not more bored than I expected to be," Hilda said.

"Not worried about anything?"

"No," said Hilda. "Why should I be worried?"

"No reason, of course, but I just wondered"—Eustace was determined to rid himself of this tormenting uncertainty, ridiculous as he knew it would sound when uttered—"if your room was all right?"

Hilda stiffened, and Eustace felt that he had tried her too far.

"You know I don't care where I sleep," she said sombrely, and added as if it was an afterthought—"Dick may be taking me up in his aeroplane when we get this meal over."

"Oh, Hilda, don't do that!"

She turned on him as if he were a fly that had settled on her, but fly-like he disregarded the gesture. "Promise me you won't," he urged.

Instead of reiterating her resolve, she gave him an abstracted look which seemed to be weighing factors in the proposal more important than his liking or not liking it.

"You might come too," she said.

"Oh," cried Eustace, "I couldn't! There wouldn't be room, and I should be air-sick, and anyhow, Dick hasn't——"

"What haven't I done?" said a voice at his elbow. "What's this?" Dick went on, coming between them, "a family conference?" He looked sternly at Eustace, and then began to smile. "You know, I shall have to stand up for you," he said. "In the name of my sex I shall protest against the tyranny of petticoat government."

"Oh," said Eustace, "but it was I——" He stopped.

"Well, whoever it was," said Dick firmly, "mustn't. Now I shall sweep you into luncheon, or my father will be getting restive."

CHAPTER X

THE SIXTH HEAVEN

THE moment the aeroplane began to move, Eustace was convinced that something had gone wrong with it. It slid along, rapidly gathering pace, but with its impotent-looking wheels, so unequal to its weight, hanging only a foot or two above the ground. Not very far ahead, three or four hundred yards at most, the trees of the park loomed up, innocent objects once, now suddenly charged with dread. The aeroplane would never clear them. If only Dick would stop while there was time, and start again or, better still, call the venture off!

Eustace glanced at his companions, drawn up as if on the touch-line at a football match. But there was no consternation on their faces. They were all laughing and waving. The nearest thing to a scream was Lady Staveley's cry, "Expect you back for tea!" which Dick and Hilda seemed to hear, for they turned and waved. To Eustace any parting was an emotional experience: how could they all take this so calmly? He held his breath while, with a triumphant roar as though it had only pretended to be earthbound, the aeroplane drew away from the grass and space showed between it and the land. Space but not sky, for the trees still overtopped the line of its flight. Then, with a transition too quick to follow, the trees had shrunk to bushes, with a wide strip of blue between them and the aeroplane. Wheeling, it brushed the tree-tops, seeming to lose height; now it was travelling across a background of massed green foliage, a steel point boring into the soft body of the air. The drone of the engine grew fainter, then louder again, and Eustace realized that the aeroplane was coming back. Had they run out of petrol? Had Hilda asked to be put down?

In vain to speculate on something that moved quicker than his thoughts. The roar increased: for a moment it seemed as though the machine stood still above their heads, a timeless interval in which Eustace imagined all kinds of happenings—wavings, leanings over the side, even an exchange of remarks—which his memory could not afterwards confirm. Hardly had the contact been established before the aeroplane and its living freight became again depersonalized, a thing of sight and sound. Darkening, black, invisible, it swung into the sun, to reappear far off, transparent and insubstantial. Purposefully now it held to its course; swaying slightly, it dipped its wing to the sun, receiving in return a silvery salutation.

Watching its flight, Eustace felt his mind growing tenuous in sympathy, something that he had launched had taken wing and was flying far beyond his control, with a strength which was not his, but which he had had it in him to release. Somewhere in his dull being, as in the messy cells of a battery, that dynamism had slumbered; now it was off to its native ether, not taking him with it—that could not be—but leaving him exalted and tingling with the energy of its discharge. The sense of fulfilment he had felt when Hilda promised to come to Anchorstone returned to him, the ecstasy of achievement which is only realized in dreams.

As the sound of the engine died away, he turned to the others, expecting to see on their faces a counterpart of his own elation. But just as he had been surprised by their light-heartedness at the terrifying moment of the take-off, so now he was disappointed by their prosaic acceptance of the apotheosis. Lady Staveley, who scanned the sky still longer than he did, heaved a sigh, but the others might have been watching somebody catch a bus.

"You look so pleased," said Lady Nelly. "Do you always look like that when you speed your sister off into the void?"

"I never have before," answered Eustace. "I didn't

know I should feel like that. I didn't want her to go. I tried to persuade her not to."

"But now she has gone, you feel it's for the best?"

Eustace regarded this question from several angles before he answered.

"I suddenly felt that the air was her element," he said shyly.

"I agree with you," said Lady Nelly, "and now she's in it. But when she comes back," she added playfully, "I shall tell her that whichever heaven she was in, you were certainly in the sixth."

"Oh, you mustn't," cried Eustace. "She might misunderstand and even think I was glad to get rid of her."

"Well, weren't you?"

"Oh *no*," exclaimed Eustace, horrified. "It was only that I somehow liked to think of her in the sky."

"We shall all be there one day," said Lady Nelly, rather tartly. "Shall you like that? Does your face break into smiles whenever any of us soars aloft? Now I know the kind of treat to arrange for you—an orgy of obituary notices, or better still, funerals."

Eustace laughed. He liked this kind of teasing.

"But I noticed you didn't try to give us any entertainment of that kind yourself," Lady Nelly went on. "You didn't speak up when Dick asked for volunteers."

"Well," said Eustace defensively, "nobody did. They wanted Hilda to go."

"That's what you prefer to think. I saw disappointment on several faces."

Eustace looked troubled.

"I suppose Dick did rather hurry over it. What a pity there wasn't room for another. But I expect they'd all been up before, and Hilda hadn't, that was why he wanted her."

"Perhaps it was," said Lady Nelly.

"You do think she'll be quite safe?" asked Eustace with a sudden plunge into anxiety. "I couldn't bear

the idea of her going at first, but when I saw them soaring up like—like larks, it seemed quite all right. I suppose Dick's had plenty of experience."

"Yes, he's had a lot of experience, in one way and another," said Lady Nelly. "And if they did crash, they'd crash together. He wouldn't be so ungentlemanly as to throw her out, like ballast, to lighten the load. But you needn't worry, he's a very good pilot."

"You think I needn't?" said Eustace, who could never be reassured too often.

"I'm certain."

They had reached the lake. Compared to Eustace's memories of it, dating from the evening of the picnic on the downs, it seemed a small sheet of water. But it possessed in a peculiar degree the power still water has to calm the fret and ferment of the spirit. It is the movement in the mind that hurts, and the sight of water in which movement is imperceptible somehow brings the mind's traffic to a stand; and by presenting it with an unruffled likeness of itself, persuades it to peace. Here was no muddy bank, no hint that the element was being imprisoned against its will. The sweet, short grass grew right to the edge, and on the reedy margin the water was clear and sparkling. Across the feathery, indented border the image of the house was spread out before them, the pink of the Banqueting Hall, the glinting, lively grey of the flint-flecked front; elongated and wavy, the image of the chimneys trembled into the rushes at their feet. The house had the mirror to itself, undiminished by the rivalry of Whaplode.

The rest of the party were strolling away to the right, towards the house, but Lady Nelly made no movement to follow them.

"I like the look of that bower over there," she said, pointing to a group of willows whose silvery foliage, enclosing dark shadows, gave mystery to the top end of the lake. "As we can't have an aeroplane and ride off

into the blue, shall we take a little stroll this way? I might even slip into the water, and then you would have the pleasure of saying I was in my right element. I shouldn't expect you to rescue me, of course. That would spoil everything."

Eustace glanced at her, and at her lilac dress on which the little touches of pink had the effect of coquetting self-consciously but altogether charmingly with her age. She had asked him a question, but there was no inquiry in her face; the slight smile simply said that she was saving him the trouble of voicing their joint wishes. Her thoughts showed his the way.

"When we get back to tea," she said, as they moved off in the direction of the willows, "we'll tell them we've had our escapade too."

More than ever, Eustace felt in bliss.

"Why did you say 'the sixth heaven' a moment ago?" he asked.

"Oh, I expect you always keep one in reserve."

But their return was not to be so triumphal. Faces looked up rather quickly and then away again, as though they had been expecting someone else. Sir John Staveley rose from the larger of the two round tea-tables and said, "Come and sit with us, Nelly." Eustace's orders seemed to hang fire, but presently he found himself installed at the other table, with Anne and Monica and Victor Trumpington, and an empty chair. Eustace glanced wistfully at the senior table and at the late companion of his walk, who now seemed separated from him by an unbridgeable gulf. Antony was there too, talking with immense animation to Lady Staveley, his elbow stuck out in the attitude of the fisherman in 'The Boyhood of Raleigh.' As she warmed to the fire of his discourse, Eustace could see the family likeness. Sir John, talking to Lady Nelly, frowned occasionally, and drew back his head like an offended tortoise, as though to escape the impact of Antony's volubility.

"Tea, Mr. Cherrington, or iced coffee?"

"Oh, tea, thank you," said Eustace.

"I never drink tea if there's iced coffee," remarked Victor Trumpington.

Eustace wondered if this was a challenge. Victor's face was perfectly impassive; he seemed too indolent to change his expression. Eustace started out with the intention of liking everyone, and regarded failure as his fault, not theirs. It might be true, as Stephen had more than once told him, that he had the instincts of an accompanist, and did not know what people were really like. But this did not seem the moment to change his social technique.

"I imagine that coffee keeps me awake," he said placatingly.

"Well, you can't always be asleep," said Victor Trumpington in his lazy voice.

Eustace could think of no suitable riposte, and was relieved when Anne, handing Eustace his tea, said:

"That doesn't come well from you, Victor. You're a regular dormouse."

"I certainly sleep more than Dick does," Victor remarked. "He seems to me to be awake half the night."

"Oh, he's always kept very late hours," said Anne.

"And early ones too."

"Yes, he's got too much energy. I wish I had. More coffee, Victor?"

"Thanks. But doesn't this political business absorb some of it?"

"It seemed to, for a time. What do you think, Monica?"

Eustace looked at Monica. She had a large face, inclined to redness, a decided nose, gooseberry-green eyes that looked small between eyelids heavy from headache, and a halo of wiry hair the colour of dried hay. The whole effect was too vital and good-natured to be unpleasing, but Eustace missed the look of serenity she had worn the night before.

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"I don't think he quite knows what he wants," she said. "I shouldn't be surprised if he went back to Irak after all. In fact, he told me he might."

"How terrible for those poor Arabs," drawled Victor. "Excuse me, Anne, but you know what I mean, he must give them no peace. Physical jerks before breakfast and all tents neatly folded by nightfall."

"I think he finds their way of life more to his taste than ours," said Anne. "Freer, you know."

"What do Arab women do?" asked Victor. "We never seem to hear about them. There must be some. I fancy they're always being abducted; but what do they do between-times? Sit in their tents mending their yashmaks?"

"Dick says it's a man's country," said Monica. "The women don't count for much. He gave me some reports to read on that very question, and asked me to look up some facts for him in London; but we haven't had time to go over them yet."

"Isn't it about time they were back?" said Victor. He made a movement to consult his watch, but finding that it was hidden under his sleeve, desisted. "How long do these joy-rides usually last?"

Involuntarily Anne looked at Monica.

"Not more than a couple of hours generally," she said. Since they had begun to talk about Dick she had recovered some of her lost liveliness. "He usually goes on for about half an hour after one has asked him to turn round—do you find that?"

"He certainly has no mercy," said Anne. "But then, I don't enjoy flying as you do."

"Yes, I love it," said Monica, and added vaguely, "in ordinary circumstances."

Eustace got the impression that they all looked away from him, as though he were to blame for Monica's missing her ride. Lady Nelly was right: there had been disappointment.

"Will they land on Palmer's Plot?" asked Victor.

"Dairy Haye's a better pitch, *I* think."

"Dick says it's too bumpy."

"Why not the Old Meadow, then?"

"Not long enough."

Lost among these allusions to places he did not know, which were household words and landmarks to the others, Eustace let his eyes slide from face to face, like a dog that waits to hear its name called.

"Either there or in the Forty Acre," Monica was saying. "But that's further away, and Dick hates walking. I often tease him about it. He's so energetic in most ways, but he'd take a car to go a hundred yards. I remember——" She stopped.

"Did I hear you say the Forty Acre?" Sir John called out from the other table. "He'd better not try to land there—it's full of cows."

"Wouldn't they be in the stable by that time?" said Eustace, anxious to pull his weight in the conversation.

His contribution fell flat, but Victor said:

"It would take more than a cow to upset an aeroplane, surely."

"I wasn't thinking of the aeroplane, I was thinking of the cows," said Sir John, "and the compensation we should have to pay."

"Oh, Papa, what a heartless speech," said Anne. "Here we are trying not to worry, and Mr. Cherrington has hardly touched his tea, and you talk about casualties to cows as if nothing else mattered."

"You're not really worried, are you?" said Sir John. "It's six o'clock. Yes, I suppose they ought to be back." He paused, and for the first time a tremor of anxiety made itself felt in the room.

"I've known him often come back later than this," said Monica.

"What's that? What's that?" asked Sir John, who was apt to become deaf when preoccupied.

"Monica said she's often known Dick come back later than this," repeated Anne, raising her voice, and Monica reddened slightly.

"Pity you couldn't go too, Monica," said Sir John, "just to remind him of the time. He wouldn't be so unpunctual with you, I dare say."

Across the silver tea-kettle Lady Staveley's straight gaze telegraphed a warning. Trying to repair his blunder Sir John floundered more deeply. "Miss . . . Miss . . ." He groped for the name.

"Cherrington, my dear," prompted his wife.

"Of course—how stupid of me. Miss Cherrington doesn't know Dick's habits as well as Monica does."

No one found anything to say to this. Eustace felt himself the object of resentful thoughts, and suddenly realized how little he must mean to most of these people who had never seen him before and probably did not want to see him again. In spite of their friendly manner they had a common life behind park walls and ring fences which he did not share. They were withdrawing from him, all of them, even Lady Nelly, even Antony, and looking down at him from upper windows, belonging to bedrooms he could not trace, as he stood alone in the courtyard, with his luggage beside him. He was alone, Hilda was not with him, and for a frightening moment he saw himself as something alien and inimical, a noxious little creature from outside who had crept into this ancient and guarded enclosure to do it harm.

"Perhaps Miss Cherrington's sense of time is just as good as Monica's," said Victor Trumpington in his flat voice. "What do you think, Cherrington?"

Eustace started.

"Hilda's absolutely punctual as a rule," he told them earnestly. "She has to be, you know, at the clinic." He paused, to let the emprossement with which he always mentioned the word 'clinic' have its effect. But this time they did not respond, and he went on quickly, "But sometimes she forgets about time altogether, much more than I should."

"Let's hope this isn't one of those times," said Victor lazily. "Shall we go out and scan the sky-line?"

Everyone agreed that this would be a good idea, and they drifted away from the tea-tables. Isolated among the sofas, Eustace involuntarily waited for Antony; but he had attached himself to Lady Nelly, and Eustace, almost with a pang, saw them turn to each other gladly, like the old friends that they were.

The party followed each other through the iron gateway and past the ruined chapel up an incline overlooking the lawn, to a point where only roofs and chimneys stood between them and the sky-line.

"That's where they'd be coming from," said Monica. "At least, if Dick's gone the way he usually goes."

Their eyes followed the line of her arm into the cloudless sky, but not a speck rewarded their scrutiny, and disappointment dulled the faces which had been alight with eagerness and hope.

"What are we all standing here for?" said Sir John, testily. "Looking for them won't bring them. There's nothing to worry about; they've probably come down somewhere and are having tea." He spoke as though to convince himself, and for a moment Eustace wondered if he were not more worried than any of them. "Why don't you four go and play lawn-tennis?" he went on almost irritably, turning to Anne, who was standing with Monica and Victor and Eustace in an uneasy bunch. "The court's there, and nobody ever uses it."

Anne looked interrogatively at her companions, who hastily nodded. Even Eustace nodded. His host's displeasure was more to be dreaded than his doctor's.

"That's settled, then," Sir John said, mollified and seeming to repent of his ill humour. "Hope you'll have a good game. I'll make Crosby ring up the golf links to send along two boys to throw the balls up. Can't play lawn-tennis if you have to fag the balls. You might have thought of that, Anne."

"No one proposed that we should play tennis till a moment ago, Papa."

"Just so. You leave me to think of everything. What

will you do, Nelly? Will you watch? Or will you make a four at bridge with Edith and Antony and me?"

"Antony doesn't play," said Lady Nelly. "He hasn't been properly brought up. He'll have to take me for a stroll as a punishment."

"Well, you mustn't let him talk too much," said Sir John, giving Antony a glance of mock severity, "or you'll never get anywhere."

"I don't want to," said Lady Nelly. "I ask nothing more than to hang upon his lips."

Sir John shook his head as if to signify that the case was hopeless. Lady Staveley took a last look at the sky and then said she must go and write some letters.

"Letters, letters," said Sir John. "I don't know how you find so many letters to write. No one ever writes to me."

"That's because you don't write to them, my dear," said Lady Staveley crisply. "I shall be in my sitting-room," she added to the others generally, "in case you have any news."

She took her husband's arm, and they walked down the slope towards the house, she very upright, he leaning towards her.

"I expect we ought to go too," Lady Nelly said. Her look signalled a regretful farewell to the others, a delighted welcome to Antony. They moved away to take the same walk in reverse, it seemed to Eustace, that he had had with her earlier in the afternoon.

"Well, now we've got our orders," said Anne, "I suppose we must go and change. But are you sure you want to play? Papa won't really mind if we don't."

"He will, Anne," said Victor. "He'll question us closely about every ball and tell us how we should have played it. I shouldn't be surprised if he comes out to coach us. He doesn't like the way you produce your back-hand, Anne."

"I know," said Anne, "but I'm too old to change."

"I expect Cherrington is a star performer," Victor

proceeded. "Let's make him and Monica play an exhibition match while we look on."

"You always want to look on," said Anne.

"Well, don't you?"

Anne said nothing, and Eustace, fearful lest they should get a false idea of his prowess, exclaimed, "Oh, I'm no good at all. I can hardly hit the ball."

"Is he speaking the truth, I wonder?" asked Victor.

"Oh, I expect so," said Anne absently, as though taking it for granted that Eustace couldn't play tennis, and as though it didn't matter very much whether he could or not. "I beg your pardon," she took herself up. "That sounded rather rude. I meant, it doesn't matter a bit if you don't play well—none of us is any good except Monica. She even plays singles with Dick. Think of the energy." Involuntarily they all looked up at the sky. "I do think it's rather inconsiderate of him," said Anne suddenly. "I'm not worried, because I know he'll turn up all right, but Mama and Papa will be. He really is a little selfish."

"Oh, you mustn't be hard on him," said Monica. "It's only because he has a different way of looking at things. He told me once that he would feel all wrong with himself if he didn't take risks."

"It isn't his taking risks that I mind," said Anne. "At least, I do rather mind; but as you say, it's his nature. No, what I mind is his not coming back when he says he will, and leaving us to wonder what's happened."

"I'm sure he doesn't mean to be inconsiderate," said Monica warmly. "He just forgets about everything. Nowadays I can generally make him come back, but there was a time when I couldn't."

After a moment's pause, Anne said to Eustace:

"Is this the first time your sister's been up?"

"With Dick, do you mean?" asked Eustace.

"No, not specially with him, with anyone." Anne spoke a little impatiently.

"Yes, she did go once," said Eustace. "But that was

at some seaside town where there was a professional pilot taking people up at so much a time. She's never been in a private aeroplane before. I didn't want her to go," he added helplessly, feeling more than ever that they blamed him for Dick's lapse.

"I don't think any of us pressed her to go," said Anne.

"Well, Dick did, a little," said Eustace.

"Isn't it funny," said Monica, "how Dick will press people to do something, not much caring whether they want to or not, and the moment they say 'yes' he loses interest? I've often noticed it. If Miss Cherrington hadn't hesitated, I believe he would have been back long ago."

"Was your sister air-sick when she took that trip at the seaside?" Anne asked. She seemed unwilling now to call Hilda by her name, though she had done so, Eustace remembered, when they were playing billiard-fives the night before.

"She wasn't up very long then," he said. "But I don't think she ever would be. She's very strong, you know."

"She looks as if she was," said Anne. "But being strong hasn't much to do with it."

"Dick hates one to feel air-sick," said Monica. "He told me once that if I ever was, he'd never take me up again."

"And were you?" asked Victor Trumpington, with languid interest.

Monica flushed.

"No."

"Anne, what a dawdler you are," cried Victor with unwonted decision. "We really must get started, or what will your father say? I'm sure he's on the court now, chafing with impatience and swearing at the ball-boys. Do your 'Sister Anne' act, and then let's go."

They stood in a row automatically shading their eyes from the glare. But the light had lost its fierceness. Dropping their hands, they felt the soft air bathe their

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eyes like water. The coolness and fulfilment of the day flowed round them but could find no entry. Not seeing what they sought had blocked with anxiety the portals of their minds. They walked in silence down the grassy slope towards the house.

Parting from the others at the door of the Victorian wing, Eustace was aware of feeling worried, but not so much on Hilda's account, he was surprised to find, as because of the spirit of unfriendliness that seemed to underlie their recent conversation. Hilda, Eustace now felt, was immortal; she could be hurt or injured, but the idea of her being killed never occurred to him as a possibility. True, he had caught the infection of anxiety from the others; but at the back of his mind, possessing it, was still the strange exaltation he had felt when he saw Hilda whirled into the blue. The episode had been like a consummation of his thought of her: it was an apotheosis, comparable to the glorious exit of Bacchus and Ariadne, launched into the skies. He could not believe that the empyrean, her native element, would in any sense, least of all the literal sense, let Hilda down.

He would have liked to say to the others, calming their fears, 'No harm will come to Dick, while Hilda's there!' But, thought Eustace, searching frantically for his white trousers, they hadn't seemed to worry about Hilda; their anxiety was all for Dick. They didn't seem to care, or even to realize, that they both ran the same risk. At tea they had scarcely referred to her, and when at last they did, and Anne asked him whether she had ever flown before, there was no warmth of interest in the question; they hadn't pursued it except to inquire, rather tastelessly, Eustace thought, whether she had been air-sick. And they had even tried to make out that Dick hadn't very much wanted to go, and Hilda had—which was simply untrue. Really, from the meagreness and reticence of their references to her, Hilda might have been some kind of unmentionable

disease—and he a lesser symptom of the same disease, equally to be hushed up. It was all so different from last night, when everyone had seemed interested and pleased and welcoming. Of course, there had been moments of coolness and reserve, especially on Lady Staveley's part, as was natural between strangers; but at the billiard-fives match Hilda and he had seemed to belong to the party, to be old habitués of Anchorstone, sharing in family jokes and stories and catchwords. Now they were like strangers, and unwanted strangers too. The greatest change was in Monica. Last night she had been gay and jolly and forthcoming; at dinner they had talked like old friends. But to-day she kept him at a distance and the welcome was gone out of her glance. Eustace did not want to think ill of people, but surely there was something almost ill-bred in the way she spoke of Dick as if she owned him, and constituted herself his interpreter. Even Anne hadn't quite liked it, Eustace thought; he had caught her looking at Monica as if she wished she would shut up.

Only the trousers were missing. Eustace had collected everything else. It was too exasperating. None of this would have happened if he had left his tennis things at home; but he believed them to be indispensable to a country house visit. They were to wear, not to play in. Dick must not think him too much of a crock, nor must the servants. If he was asked to play, he had told himself, he could easily find some excuse. Sir John's command had taken him by surprise; now his bluff was called; now he was punished.

There were two chests of drawers in the room and a built-in cupboard, with white doors. Both the doors were ajar, and at subtly different angles, which increased the impression of discomfort; most of the drawers were half-way out, and one had come right out, defying all Eustace's efforts to put it back. Mixed up with the clothes which he had

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taken off, and which were lying on the floor, were some he had pulled out in his hurry; the ends of two or three ties peeped coyly over the edge of one drawer, a loop of his relief braces drooped from another. The swing pier-glass that always hung its head, and the long mirror attached to the wall, trebled the scene of disorder; and wherever he moved he saw two reflections of his thighs, too thin or too fat whichever way you cared to look at them, covered, but hardly to the point of decency, by his flapping shirt-tails.

They must all be waiting for him, getting more and more impatient. Where's that Cherrington, or whatever he's called? Why doesn't he turn up? Not content with persuading his precious sister to get Dick killed, he keeps us hanging about. . . . And meanwhile Sir John Staveley, faced by an empty tennis-court, grows more and more irritable and vents his ill-humour on the innocent ball-boys. 'Stop playing about! Stand still, can't you? Don't you know I can have you birched for this? Stop blubbering, you fool, for God's sake!'

What should he do? Useless to ring, for the bell didn't ring, and if it did, how terrible to face, after ten minutes' wait, the raised eyebrows, the outraged stare, of the entering footman.

'Did you ring, sir?'

'Yes, I did. I'm afraid I can't find my white flannel trousers.'

'If you'll excuse my saying so, sir, it's not likely you'll find them under all that mess. That mess will take me at least fifty-five minutes to clear up, and this is my evening out.'

'Oh, I am so sorry.'

'It's no good your apologizing, sir, I was only saying to them in the Hall, that, of all the guests who've ever stayed here in my experience, man and boy, you've given far the most trouble. We wondered where you

had been brought up, sir, we did, straight. Not in a gentleman's house, I said, believe me.'

Eustace looked round in despair. He had been through all the drawers three times; now he must go through them again. The first drawer stuck at an obstinate angle, and would not budge either way. Perhaps it would be best just to tidy things up, put on his Sunday suit again, walk composedly down to the tennis-court (only he didn't know the way) and say in his most ordinary voice, 'Isn't it maddening, but I find that I haven't got any flannel trousers (or I've left my trousers behind, or my trousers are lost, or the moths have eaten my trousers, or my trousers have vanished into thin air). I'm sorry to disappoint you, but these things will happen, won't they? and three makes quite a good game. Yes, Sir John, those ball-boys are rather troublesome. No home discipline, I fear. They're just the same at our place.'

What a drab prospect; but at any rate to face the facts and act realistically would win the approval of Stephen, who had often warned Eustace that he did not give facts their proper value. Dejectedly he scooped up some of the things from the floor and replaced them in the drawers; next the eavesdropping ties (he had brought ten, in all; how could he expect to wear them?) rejoined their companions; then the yellow felt braces, that seemed to be straining for liberty, were laid on the dress trousers to which they were attached. As he was doing this Eustace gave the braces a tweak; the black garment fell forward; and there, exactly beneath, like the sun in total eclipse, were the white trousers he had been looking for. All thought of restoring order among his possessions forgotten, Eustace struggled into his trousers, dashed downstairs and charged across the courtyard. By the iron gate stood Victor, a tall, solitary figure practising an imaginary forehand drive which even at this distance gave Eustace an uneasy feeling of being outclassed.

"Hullo," said Victor, withdrawing his weight from his left foot and undulating upwards. "How quick you've been. Those girls are not down yet. Why do women always take such ages to get ready? Let's walk along to the tennis-court, shall we, and have a knock up. No sign of the prodigals returning, I suppose?" He gave the sky a perfunctory glance, and looked altogether as unlike Stout Cortez as it was possible to look. "Feeling anxious about your sister?" he asked, amiably but with the minimum of inquiry in his tone.

Eustace said he didn't feel really anxious.

"Dick usually brings 'em back," remarked Victor with something like a sigh.

They walked in silence under the chestnuts, then Victor said:

"A chap I know told me he heard you read a paper at Oxford—something about Nineteenth-century Mystics."

"Oh, did he?" exclaimed Eustace.

"I said he couldn't have, because there weren't any."

"Well, not perhaps in the sense that St. Teresa of Avila was a mystic," said Eustace cautiously.

"Anyhow, he said it was a damned good paper."

This simple statement changed Eustace's whole outlook. He had misjudged Victor. Far from being just a man at the Foreign Office, and a supercilious one, he had a fine, sensitive spirit which he concealed from all but Eustace. Would it be safe to pursue the mystic way with him?

Eustace thought not, but ventured to say:

"There was Emily Brontë, for instance."

"'No coward soul is mine'—and all that." Victor's habitual languor of utterance was so markedly at variance with Emily's spirit, that Eustace could hardly suppress a smile.

"Well," he said diffidently, "I think 'Last Lines' is more ontological than mystical—she had outgrown her mysticism when she wrote that."

"Good Lord, what words you use. I don't know what mysticism is, but can you grow out of it, like a weak chest or a tendency to chilblains?"

"Wordsworth thought so," said Eustace. "In the 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality' "—he stopped to clear his voice of didacticism—"of course Wordsworth was speaking of nature mysticism; Christian mysticism is different—it's an aspect of faith, I suppose—and perhaps you couldn't grow out of that unless you lost your faith. But nature mysticism may fade into the light of common day, or even be choked, I should think, by hard facts that stop up the outlets of the soul."

"Quoting from your paper?" said Victor, genially suspicious.

Eustace blushed.

"Well, the last little bit."

"You say that hard facts may—er—stop up the outlets of the soul." Victor's voice, like a pair of tongs, dangled the phrase distastefully. "But what I don't understand is this. Isn't mysticism a way of escaping from hard facts, and the harder they are don't they the more confirm the mystic in his mysticism?"

Eustace heaved a sigh. "In some cases they may. But not all mystics are unhappy, or driven to mysticism by unhappiness. Blake was a very happy man, and St. Teresa was a very practical woman, not in the least afraid of facts. But all mystics have a commutative faculty in the mind which enables them, at the moment of vision, to be unconscious of all facts, or rather all facts but one. If they were conscious of the smallest fact, a toe-nail, for instance, separate from the experience, they would lose the experience. What I meant was, that a fact might become too—too self-assertive to yield to the mind's transforming quality. Then you could have no sense of union with reality, because reality would be tethered, so to speak, to the fact, whatever it was."

"Do you speak from experience?" asked Victor, swinging his racquet at an imaginary ball.

"Oh no," said Eustace. "I have no claim whatever to be a mystic. My sense of external reality is imperfect, so they tell me, but that's not at all the same thing." Just a blind creature, he thought, moving about in a world not realized. He laughed awkwardly. Victor's unlooked-for sympathy had surprised him out of his usual reticence, and he wondered what this conversation would sound like if reported to Dick.

"That's what I shall say when I miss the ball"—Victor gave Eustace a sidelong glance. "'Excuse me, but my sense of external reality is imperfect.' I must be a mystic, for I have a sense of complete union with the ball when it's not there." He leaned forward and swooped into another imaginary drive.

They came to a gate in the belt of chestnuts. "Here we are," said Victor, "on the threshold of reality."

The court lay immediately before them, a terracotta expanse flickering behind wire-netting. At the far end, by the little pavilion, two small boys, in attitudes of intense absorption, were bouncing the balls up and down apparently to see which could make them bounce the highest.

"It's easy to tell Sir John isn't here," said Victor. "By God, I'll have their blood." His voice betrayed no anxiety to execute his threat, and at their approach the boys, with an admirable blend of dignity and haste, dissociated themselves from their game, and the smaller one began to walk down the court in an aloof manner, whistling unconcernedly at the sky.

Once inside the netting Eustace experienced the exciting renewal of personality that a tennis-court always gave him. He was on trial again, and though the sensation was not altogether pleasant, something in him welcomed it. He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. A boy advanced, and with a measuring eye bounced two balls towards him.

"Do you like three, sir?" He spoke in an awed

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voice, as though to Wilding or Tilden or Norman Brookes. Eustace shook his head and called across the net to Victor,

"I'm awfully bad, you know."

"We all say that," said Victor. "I expect you're a dark horse really."

CHAPTER XI

DOWN TO EARTH

LADY STAVELEY had given orders that the curtains should not be drawn. Perhaps she thought that when darkness fell the lighted windows might serve as a beacon to the returning aeroplane, circling in uncertainty above the sand-banks of the cold North Sea; or else she hoped to catch a glimpse of it streaking past the great window in the twilight, and be the first to say "Here he is" or (she must school herself to remember) "Here they are!"

She sat facing the window, and Eustace, on her left, with Victor Trumpington opposite, could turn his head and watch the daylight fading from the sky, and lingering on the heads of the white rhododendrons and azaleas, when their crimson and orange neighbours were shadows of their former hue. At a man's height from the floor an open lattice in the amber wall let in the air and showed the true tones of the evening.

It had been nearly nine when they sat down to dinner. Now the meal was half-way through. The tension had increased, but the irritability and veiled recrimination had gone; hope was anæsthetized and they were facing the inevitable. *They* were, or seemed to be; Eustace was not. Their eyes told him, the consciously hushed movements of the servants told him, reason told him, that he had little hope of seeing Hilda alive. But his heart told him otherwise; the exultation he had felt at the moment of her taking off still glowed there, and glowed more brightly now that there was no longer blame and hostility on the faces round him. He could not testify to his confidence, for it would only sound silly and callous to them, and at times his mind shared their anxiety. Besides, they had

given him no chance: the conversation, whether general or particular, had by common consent turned on indifferent matters, ignoring the challenge of the empty chairs. When they did speak of Dick and Hilda, it was in ordinary tones, as of people who had just gone out of the room and would come back at any moment.

"I shall follow your sister's career with great interest," Lady Staveley was saying, "and I hope we shall have the opportunity of seeing her again. I'm sorry she can't stay over Monday. I expect her work keeps her pretty busy."

"Oh yes, it does," said Eustace. "At any rate"—he smiled—"she thinks it does. She always says that if anything happened to her, the clinic would go to pieces the next day."

The words slipped out before he was aware of them; too late, he bit his lip. Lady Staveley quickly rearranged her remaining knives and forks, and crumbled a bit of bread. She was wearing a day dress, Eustace noticed, and almost no jewellery.

"You must persuade her to come again," she said. "This has been such a short visit, and she's hardly seen anything of the place. You missed your walk on the sands with her, didn't you?"

Eustace said that didn't matter.

"Next time you come, we won't let Dick monopolize her," Lady Staveley said. "I was thinking about your first visit, so long ago. Dick was only a boy then, wasn't he?"

"About fifteen or sixteen," Eustace said; "but he seemed very grown up to me."

"It's his birthday in July," said Lady Staveley. "We were going to——" She stopped. "Excuse me, so stupid of me, I forget what we were going to do. Do you make a great deal of birthdays in your family, Mr. Cherrington?"

"We've always kept Hilda's," said Eustace, "for some reason, much more than mine or Barbara's—she's my younger sister—though as a matter of fact, Barbara

gets more presents than either of us, and Hilda doesn't really care about that sort of thing."

"When is her birthday?" asked Lady Staveley.

"In May," said Eustace, and something impelled him to add, "she was twenty-eight."

"Dick will be thirty-two," said Lady Staveley. "How young you all seem."

Eustace saw that her lips trembled, and he would have liked to change the subject, but he lacked the conversational resource, and it was Victor Trumington who said:

"Did I hear you say young, Lady Staveley? I feel older than the chair on which I sit."

They all laughed immoderately at this sally, partly, Eustace guessed, because it relieved the strain, and partly because Victor was evidently a licensed jester, privileged to make jokes which would have been condemned as contrary to the canon if uttered by anyone else. Feeling that Victor had won his hostess in fair fight, Eustace addressed himself to Anne, who had no other neighbour except an empty chair. Lady Nelly, on Sir John Staveley's right, seemed very far away, and Monica, on his left, hardly more than a blur across the red-shaded candles. Antony was talking to her; Eustace could see the line of his jaw; he expressed himself with everything he had, even his bones seemed to be articulate. A vacant place came next him, bristling with knives and forks.

"We don't seem to have arranged the table very well to-night," Anne said. Unlike Lady Staveley, she was wearing an evening dress and more make-up than the night before. "Mama left it to me, and I didn't seem able to divide the family."

"But you have divided it," said Eustace, renewing his survey of the disposition of the diners. "Aren't all the Staveleys separated, except Sir John and Lady Nelly?"

"We shan't be when Dick comes back," said Anne. "This place"—she made a movement with her left

hand—"is for him. And there's your sister, over there."

Eustace glanced across the table, almost expecting to see Hilda materialize before him. He did not know what to say to Anne, whose hidden distress belied her brave words and the rouge which gave them colour.

"I'm sure Dick won't find fault with the arrangement," he said, "if you don't."

"He's oddly particular about little things like that," said Anne. "He won't really be pleased to see Mama in a day-dress. He has a great regard for appearances."

"Has he?" said Eustace, surprised. "For all of them? I thought he was rather unconventional."

Anne hesitated.

"In a way he is," she said, bringing Dick back into the present tense. "But not where clothes are concerned. He can't bear one to be dowdy or untidy. He's always on to me about it."

"But you're beautifully dressed!" exclaimed Eustace, looking in open admiration at what he could see of Anne's lavender-grey gown, which seemed to him the height of fashion. He did not believe it possible that any Staveley, or any member of the aristocracy, for that matter, could conceive of another as dowdy or untidy.

"I'm afraid he doesn't think so," said Anne, with that resigned, almost welcoming acceptance of an unwelcome fact that Eustace had more than once noticed in her. "But I'm glad you do. And I hope he'll like this, because I got it for him—to wear at his birthday party, that Mama was telling you about."

"But you put it on to-night!"

"Yes," said Anne, "I thought I would."

There was a pause.

"Have you got him a present?" asked Eustace.

"As a matter of fact, I haven't," said Anne. "He isn't easy to give a present to. But I'm going up to London soon. What do you suggest?"

Eustace thought hard, but the harder he thought the more completely did the thinking part of his mind succumb to Anne's conviction that her brother was dead.

"I expect he has most of the things he wants," was the only contribution he could make. "It's the same with Hilda in a way, though of course she hasn't so many things as Dick. I often think that she would rather have something taken away from her than given to her. The things I give her never seem to become part of her, if you know what I mean."

Anne smiled her rare, sweet smile.

"Yes, I do know. But Dick isn't like that. He wants things very much, only he doesn't want them long."

"After he's got them, you mean," said Eustace.

"Yes, he wants them for a long time before he gets them," Anne said. "And sometimes, I must say, he likes them afterwards. He kept a tobacco pouch I'd given him for years and had the rubber part renewed when it wore out."

"Why not give him another?" asked Eustace.

"I wanted to give him something rather special this time," said Anne.

Eustace felt drawn towards her.

"I think one should give people presents, don't you?" he said. "Even if one enjoys the giving more than they do the receiving. Of course, some people are much more present-able than others. I can imagine wanting to give Dick a present. I should like to give him one myself."

"I think you have given him one by coming here," Anne said. She smiled again, and Eustace wondered how he could ever have thought her indifferent and reserved. "He's often talked about you lately and said how much he wished we could get you down."

"I *am* pleased to hear that," cried Eustace. "I didn't think he could care much about me, I'm not really his sort. But I think he likes Hilda, don't you?"

"Yes," said Anne slowly, "I think he does." She

waited for the talk round them to gather volume. "Do you think she likes him?"

Eustace wondered what Anne wanted him to say.

"Would you like her to?"

Anne kept her eyes fixed on her plate.

"I don't think that's got much to do with it. I might say, would you?"

"Yes." Eustace drew a long breath. The monosyllable, out at last, released in him a shining wave of glory. He did not notice its effect on her until he heard her say, in a smothered voice:

"Oh, *nothing* would matter, if only they were here."

She had turned away from him, and he saw her shoulders shaking.

With a tremor in it of unwonted feeling, Sir John's voice came down the table. The butler was bending over his chair.

"Edith, my dear, Crosby wants to know if you'd like the hall lights put out now?"

Everyone instinctively looked towards the great window, which the pale-blue dusk outside was turning from amber to green.

Lady Staveley hesitated. "Is it late?" she said.

"Yes, it is rather late," said Sir John gently.

Eustace realized that the port-wine glass and the dessert-plate meant the meal was nearly at an end. He did not remember them being brought; without noticing he had taken coffee, which he never drank.

"Yes, put them out," Lady Staveley was saying. "I know you like the candles best."

Crosby then asked Sir John another question; Eustace could not hear what it was, but Sir John nodded, and Crosby must have given some signal, for immediately the two footmen appeared one on each side of the table and began to draw away the chairs which had been left for Dick and Hilda. When Lady Staveley saw what they were doing, "No, no," she said, "please leave them."

For a moment the men stood in doubt, their large

hands on the backs of the chairs, their silver buttons gleaming, their faces expressionless. "Put them back, then," said Sir John, "if her ladyship wishes it."

The men complied, and disappeared soft-footed down the steps of the dais. A switch clicked, and the room was in darkness except for the four pairs of candles.

It was like being in a theatre when the lights went down. The window was the proscenium arch and the night the stage. The darkness crowded against the window panes; beyond the lattice it thinned away into the silvery blue of the moonlit sky.

The party sat passive and expectant, looking out, awaiting some development on the shadowy earth or in the luminous sky. But none came, and the thought crossed Eustace's mind, 'Perhaps it is we who are on the stage, and the night is looking in at us with its thousand eyes, waiting for us to do something.' But it was not for him, he felt, to open the play, and he sat listening to the silence which had become like a presence in the room. Sir John's voice broke it.

"The port is with you, Cherrington," he said.

With a guilty start Eustace poured himself a glass and handed the decanter to Anne. She was passing it on mechanically without so much as a glance at it when all at once she changed her mind and filled her glass half full.

Raising the wine to his lips, Eustace turned to her and murmured,

"To their safe return!"

But Anne would not pledge him. With a tiny shake of her head and a look half reproachful, half sad, she put down the glass untasted. "I'll wait," she said.

Little spurts of conversation started and blew themselves out like puffs of wind on a still day. Eustace did not venture into the field again, but listened with admiration and envy to Antony and Lady Nelly, who seemed to find things to say which jarred on nobody, and to Victor Trumpington, who could strike the right

note merely by being himself. Monica was silent, and from the way that neither Sir John nor Antony looked at her when they spoke, he thought she must be crying.

After a time, when everyone seemed to feel that the effort of speaking was greater than the words were worth, Lady Staveley, making the familiar gesture of rearrangement on the site of her vanished knives and forks, said:

"Do you want us to leave you now, John?"

Sir John gave a little cough.

"Well, my dear, that's for you to say. It's always nice to have the ladies with us."

"I feel a little tired, perhaps we all do," said Lady Staveley. *Her glance travelled half-way down the table and then stopped, as though unable to encounter the sympathy of so many eyes.* "I shan't go to bed, but I thought——" she broke off. The social effort was taking toll of her too much. She wanted to be alone with her family, but did not know how to say so.

"What about a short rubber of bridge?" suggested Sir John, rather in the tone of a doctor prescribing to his patient an obvious but unwelcome remedy.

The cards rose up at Lady Staveley, the fat King of Spades, the smirking Queen of Diamonds, the raffish Knave of Hearts, mocking and taunting her. Habit and tradition made it extremely disagreeable to her to show the weakness that an infringement of the day's routine implied, but she was a woman, and she knew that the masculine nature seldom resented the custom-breaking exactions of feminine caprice. But in word she always deferred to her husband, and she meant to do so now.

"Perhaps some of the others would like to play," she said. "I shall——" Again she stopped, hoping, with a rush of feeling akin to hysteria, that her husband would help her out. But he only looked at her with puzzled attentiveness, digging his chin in slightly, which was his way of showing embarrassment; and it was Lady Nelly who said:

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"Couldn't we persuade Mr. Trumpington to play us one little piece on the piano, and then I expect some of us will want to go to bed."

Lady Staveley snatched at this straw as if it were heaven-sent.

"Yes, please do, Victor," she said.

"Now, no prima-donna stuff," said Sir John. "Fellow plays like a professional, you know, but it's horses' work to get him started."

But Victor was already on his feet and half-way down the steps.

"Can you see?" called Anne. Victor said he knew the way and a moment later they heard his footsteps sounding loud and hollow on the spiral staircase that led up to the gallery. When he turned on the light by the piano, his head and shoulders were visible over the balustrade. Eustace and the others on his side of the table turned their chairs round to watch him—so far removed from them now, not only by space but by his talent, which Eustace at once realized was considerable.

He played Franck's Prelude, Aria and Finale. The noble, declamatory music with its military stride and confident accent marched through the room, filling it with flags and cheering crowds, a gallant expedition setting out in the morning of life to win a spiritual prize. Eustace thought he knew why Victor chose this piece; not only was it, superficially at any rate, the very breath of encouragement, but it expressed all those sentiments which he, Victor, so sedulously kept out of his daily manner. Here, at the piano, protected by the anonymity of art, he could walk in old heroic traces without being betrayed. Sir John was right to say that he played like a professional. He had the evenness of touch, the restrained, impersonal approach to emotion; he did not hurry when the music was easy, and slow up when it was difficult. He could let go without letting himself go. He did not choose out morsels for special attention, lingering over them, detaching them from the context. But alongside these virtues of discipline

and self-control went a certain mechanical quality, a want of intimacy and individuality, a tendency to hide the contours of the music under a glitter of execution, an inclination to play rather loudly all the time and sometimes to play very loudly indeed.

It was in a lull following one of these salvoes that Eustace first heard the aeroplane. That is to say, his ear heard but his mind was unconvinced, and the next moment the faint, purposeful purring was drowned by a new fortissimo. He stole a look at the others and saw that they had not heard what he had. Their faces were folded in sorrow or closed in respectful attention to the music; their heads were bowed; Lady Nelly's nodded. Eustace guessed that it was a relief to Lady Staveley to be able to look as unhappy as she felt.

Again the steady hum creeping across the sky-line of his ear. If only he could be sure! 'Enough!' he longed to say. 'Listen, listen! It's them! They're back!' But if he should be wrong? 'No, Mr. Cherrington, that was the electric-light engine. You wouldn't know, but it always goes about this time. A natural mistake, but we wish you hadn't made it.'

He listened again, but the sound, so meaningless in itself, so meaningful to all their hearts, had ceased without (he looked again for confirmation) leaving a ripple of its passage on the faces round him. Victor played on. The music seemed triumphant now—triumphant over the throb of yearning and unsatisfied desire that beat through it. As the climax approached, his features, regular to the point of insignificance, stiffened into a mask of sternness and impassivity, on which the little blond moustache seemed to have been stuck by a practical joker. The last chord came, and he sat for a moment as if in silent colloquy with the instrument; then the light went out, his silhouette disappeared, and they heard his footsteps coming down the staircase.

A ragged round of applause greeted him.

"Well," said Sir John, "it's poison at this hour, but have it if you like. Bring us some champagne, Crosby."

"And would you like the curtains drawn, Sir John?"

"Yes, draw the curtains."

The night was shut out and forgotten.

"Now," said Sir John, "would you like us to watch you eat, or would you rather we went away and amused ourselves with a rubber till you're finished?"

"We must stay to drink their healths," said Lady Staveley quickly.

"Why, Edith you wanted to go to bed a minute ago. I never knew you so changeable. Let's all sit down, then, and light the candles. Here's your place, Miss Cherrington, we kept it for you. I should think you're quite glad to be separated from Dick—you won't want to trust yourself to him again."

"I'm afraid it was my fault as much as his," said Hilda.

"You'll have to explain that statement later, young lady," said Sir John.

She smiled at him as, with a touch of gallantry, he bent over her chair and helped to push it to the table. As if struck by a sudden impulse she raised her hands to her head with a proud, free gesture, and took her hat off; and speaking in tones more natural because more commanding than any she had used here since she came, said to Sir John,

"Will you take my hat?"

"Of course I will," he answered, and holding the hat in front of him with a reverent air he laid it on the chair beside his cap.

A look of surprise appeared on several faces; but Lady Nelly and Antony both smiled.

The glasses clinked on the silver tray as the footman carried them up the steps, and Crosby followed with the champagne foaming into its napkin. As the bottle went its round, and another was brought to supplement it, Eustace marvelled at the transformation in

the faces round him. Nothing, they seemed to say, could ever go wrong again.

Sir John stood up and tapped on the table.

"Now we must drink the health of the happy—of the happily returned pair," he said.

The company rose to their feet, leaving Dick and Hilda seated.

They seemed a little doubtful how to frame the toast; "Dick," of course, was on every lip, and in the glorious excitement of the moment, Eustace did not mind if some voices said "Miss Cherrington" instead of "Hilda," for they were one and the same person, and she was his sister, Hilda Cherrington, an honoured guest, nay the guest of honour, at Anchorstone Hall.

They did not return to the drawing-room but said their good-nights, which for some were good-byes, outside the door of the New Building, under the stars. When Eustace and Antony had climbed the college staircase, Eustace said,

"They never told us where they'd been."

Antony followed him into his room and sat down on Eustace's dressing-gown which was hanging over a chair.

"Oh, that's Dick all over," he said. "He likes to make a mystery of everything. The plain truth bores him. I expect they just went to Southend. Perhaps your sister will tell us in the train to-morrow."

Eustace wondered how he could get his dressing-gown from under Antony without seeming to reproach him for sitting on it.

"I don't suppose she will," he said, "if Dick asked her not to. She didn't tell Victor Trumpington, even when he asked her straight out."

"She was quite right," said Antony, taking the cord of the dressing-gown and absent-mindedly winding it round his neck. "It would have been like telling the town crier. But she'll tell you."

"I'm not sure," said Eustace. "She doesn't tell me a great deal. But why should they mind us knowing?"

"I don't suppose your sister objects," said Antony. "It's because Dick delights in mystification. No doubt that's how he got round the Arabs. He kept them guessing. Perhaps we shall never know where they went. Should you mind?"

From over the cord of the dressing-gown, which he had tied in an enormous bow, he suddenly gave Eustace a look of piercing inquiry.

"Sir John and Lady Staveley will think it rather odd," said Eustace. "Besides, they must have been *somewhere*."

"Now you're playing Dick's game for him," said Antony. "He'll be prowling about his room with wolfish strides, doing his nightly exercises, and saying to himself, 'Eustace is wondering where I and Hilda went to.' In that order—of course he'd put himself first. Anyhow, we shall know when the postcard comes."

"We shall be gone before then," said Eustace.

"Perhaps they never sent it," said Antony—"you remember Sir John asking where they could have bought a postcard on a Sunday."

"That was when Hilda swallowed her champagne the wrong way. She isn't used to it and doesn't like it really."

"Yes, and Sir John patted her on the back, which I thought rather familiar."

Eustace laughed.

"Well, as long as it doesn't matter," he said.

Antony seemed lost in thought.

"Oh, I don't think it *matters*," he said, "what matters is that they got back. I'm sure that's all Sir John and Cousin Edie are thinking about."

"You don't think they blamed Hilda?" said Eustace. "They didn't seem to, but she said it was partly her fault."

"She had to say that," said Antony. "Women always

do—I mean—you know what I mean. If you knew our hosts as well as I, you would realize how pleased they were. They were not only articulate, they were almost demonstrative. And the champagne! And Sir John's birthday-bridal toast! I daren't look at you while he said it. He's clearly losing grip, poor old gentleman."

"I'm not sure that Lady Staveley thought that funny," said Eustace.

"Well, you know how mothers feel on such occasions."

"But you said Lady Staveley was so thankful to see them back."

"Of course she was. But——" Fixing on Eustace a dark and enigmatic look, Antony sprang to his feet. The captive dressing-gown, tethered by its belt, swung into the air, then settled gracefully round his slight figure.

"Don't you think we shall soon hear of the engagement?" he said slyly.

"The engagement?" echoed Eustace.

"Well, everything points that way."

Catching sight of himself in a looking-glass, he twitched the crimson mantle.

Eustace also rose to his feet.

"Do you mean Dick and Hilda?"

Antony inclined his head. "Don't you like the idea?" he asked, as Eustace was silent.

"I don't know what to think," said Eustace at last.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," said Antony, and before Eustace could answer he was gone, the crimson cloud streaming from his shoulders.

The warmth of the bed contributed deliciously to the wine-warmed glow of Eustace's thoughts. What a momentous evening it had been—all the broken threads of the day drawing together, all the disparities and antagonisms (if such they were) united in one current of feeling! A climacteric. The empyrean that had received Hilda had at last received them all and they had wandered in it unchecked. The absolute sense

of spiritual well-being that Eustace had coveted all his life now enveloped him; it breathed in every glance of admiration bestowed on Hilda, in every understanding smile accorded to himself. He felt, as he had felt then in the sunshine of their appreciation, an extraordinary lightness and freedom. They had taken something from him, something off him; a burden, a weight, the stone of Sisyphus.

His life's work had been achieved, and he was sinking, sinking, through layers of accomplished effort, or of effort that need no longer be accomplished, into a soft ecstasy of being where Lady Nelly's smile, shining down from the interminable parapets of Whaplode, performed for him vicariously all that the world, at its most demanding, had ever expected of him. She was his justification, at the mere mention of whose name all newspapers, statesmen, poets, archbishops and aristocrats did homage: and he wore her like a crown. She was his firmament, in the unchallengeable order of which Dick and Hilda and Sir John and Lady Staveley had their appointed places and shone for ever, a mighty constellation. Oh, if he could only share with Hilda his rapture at her apotheosis! If only he could glide along those passages—passages that were as good as hers now—and pour his pride and happiness, like a farewell, in her ear!

'Yes, of course, Mr. Cherrington, naturally you want to see your sister, who wouldn't at a time like this? Wait until I put the light on. Now.' The passage was flooded with light except where the shadows, the high, rectangular shadows, marked the many doorways; but Eustace could not quite see who his interlocutor was. His voice was not very cultured; could he be a burglar? 'Oh, but you've got no dressing-gown; won't you catch cold? Oughtn't you to go back and fetch it? Of course we don't mind how you look, I was only thinking of your health. . . . The Honourable Antony Lachish took it with him,

did he? How thoughtless of him. But why not go back and ask him for it? I'll wait for you here. Don't go down into the courtyard, you might get a chill, there's a way through the house—you'll find it.'

But Eustace was a long time finding it because the other passages were in darkness and he didn't know where the switches were. He began to feel very cold, and there were so many doors. But at last he was standing in Antony's room. The moonlight shone in. The room was bigger than he remembered, and clothes in heaps were lying all about. How could he tell which was his dressing-gown? He didn't want to wake Antony up. But in the end he had to. 'Oh, Antony, where's my dressing-gown? I'm so sorry, but I must have it to go and see Hilda. I want to tell her how happy I am.' 'Can't you tell her in the morning?' 'No, I must tell her now. Besides there's someone waiting for me.'

Antony got out of bed. 'Well, here it is, but you must be careful with the cord because it might trip you up or curl round your neck and choke you. I had a narrow escape myself.' 'Oh I think I can manage it.'

Warmer now Eustace sped down into the quadrangle. But the door of the New Building was locked and he had to start again from his own bedroom. It was a long business and at first he thought his guide had forgotten to wait; but suddenly he spoke from the shadow of a doorway and said, 'Oh, here you are; that's much better, but what's the thing crawling round your neck?' 'Oh, just the girdle of my dressing-gown, it has a way of doing that.' 'Well, don't let it catch on a nail. Now come this way.'

Something started ahead of him; Eustace had the feeling that he was following his own shadow. 'This door should be your sister's because, you see, she has put her dress outside. What a funny thing to do.' 'Oh, I expect she thought they would clean it and press it. She isn't used to staying in houses like this—she didn't want to, really, you know. It was I who persuaded her. But, of course, the house belongs to her in a way,

doesn't it?' 'Yes, but why has she put *all* her clothes outside? Here are her stockings and her—well, everything—What can she be wearing? She can't have any clothes on at all, she must be a regular Lady Godiva.'

'If you knock,' said Eustace, gathering the clothes into his arms, 'I'll bring them all in.' 'She doesn't answer,' said the guide. 'Perhaps she has just left all her clothes there and gone for a walk in the park.' 'Oh no, she wouldn't do that, she doesn't do that even at home—try the door.' There was a pause. 'It's locked,' said the guide, 'locked on the inside—that shows she doesn't want you to come in. She doesn't want anyone to come in.' 'I'll call her,' cried Eustace in an agony. 'Hilda! Hilda!'

With the sound of her name in his ears Eustace woke up. For a moment all the horror and distress of nightmare clogged his unfolding senses. But soon the blessedness of reality began to assert itself, doubly sweet for the fears that it suppressed. He lay awake, savouring the contrast. Why did his dreams never get the facts right? The dream suggested that Hilda had gone out naked into the night, whereas the truth was that she had come in from the night, clothed in more than her own clothes, clothed in the glory and radiance of Anchorstone Hall.

What a different home-coming from that other—when he had been brought back to Cambo from this very house—guilty, ill, almost dying, to be greeted by sparse words and tense faces, by an anxiety too strained to show its tenderness. No champagne then, no fatted calf for the prodigal who had preferred the way of pleasure to the path of duty. For Dick and Hilda—also, it might be said, absent without leave—a rousing welcome had been prepared; and that welcome, Eustace obscurely felt, had made amends for the other, had repaid him for what he suffered then. How fascinating it was to try to trace a pattern in one's life.

By giving way to Hilda (for in spite of his attempted rebellion she had prevailed in the end) he had inherited Miss Fothergill's legacy; by giving way to him in the matter of coming to Anchorstone, Hilda was to inherit Anchorstone itself.

No wonder, Eustace thought confusedly, that Justice was depicted bearing a pair of scales. He realized the truth of what, until now, he had always doubted: that one might know what was best for other people and be justified in urging them to take a certain course and bringing moral pressure to bear on them, however much against their will. For Hilda to overcome such an obstacle as this, and the dead weight of circumstance too, was easy; for him it had been supremely difficult; yet his success had been even more startling than hers. He was glad now that he had failed in one of his minor projects—to walk with Hilda along the sands to revisit the scene of their old-time pond-making. Had they gone, that flight—that almost nuptial flight—into the zenith could not have happened—and who knows?—Anchorstone might still be a-begging and Hilda deprived of her reward. And besides, it would have been a cowardly sneaking back to the past, a feeble poor-spirited attempt to revive the joys of childhood, a journey *à la recherche du temps perdu*, interesting as a literary experiment perhaps, but to modern minds a most serious sin—the denial of life. At all costs one must go forward. Hilda had always known that—she had only not wanted to visit Anchorstone because in this particular instance she could not see where the true path of her development lay. But she had never been afraid of big things. She had never shared his weakness for the motionless and the miniature and the embalmed; she never clung, as he did, to the forms of things after the spirit had gone out of them. He had never got the chance to ask her to go for that sentimental journey on the sands; but no doubt she would have refused if he had. She did not like retracing her steps. She would not have wanted to look for a sea-

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anemone in a pool or stop outside the white gate of Cambo and try to recapture their feelings when last they stood there.

Perhaps Eustace did not really want to either, for as he began to evoke the brown façade, with the rather grand bow window on the left and the small flat one on the right that did not match, the smell of food coming through the door, and the voice inside telling him to hurry up, the vision faded; and now his car, a Rolls Royce, was stopping outside another doorway, upon whose grey stone pediment reclined in proud abandon portly rococo angels blowing trumpets. On either side, farther than his car-bound eye could see, extended the mighty walls of Whaplode, a Palmerston Parade celestially amplified; and down the steps came six butlers, their normally impassive features lively with expectation. "They think you're *someone else!*" whispered the chauffeur, holding the door open; but before he could put his foot to the ground Eustace was asleep.



